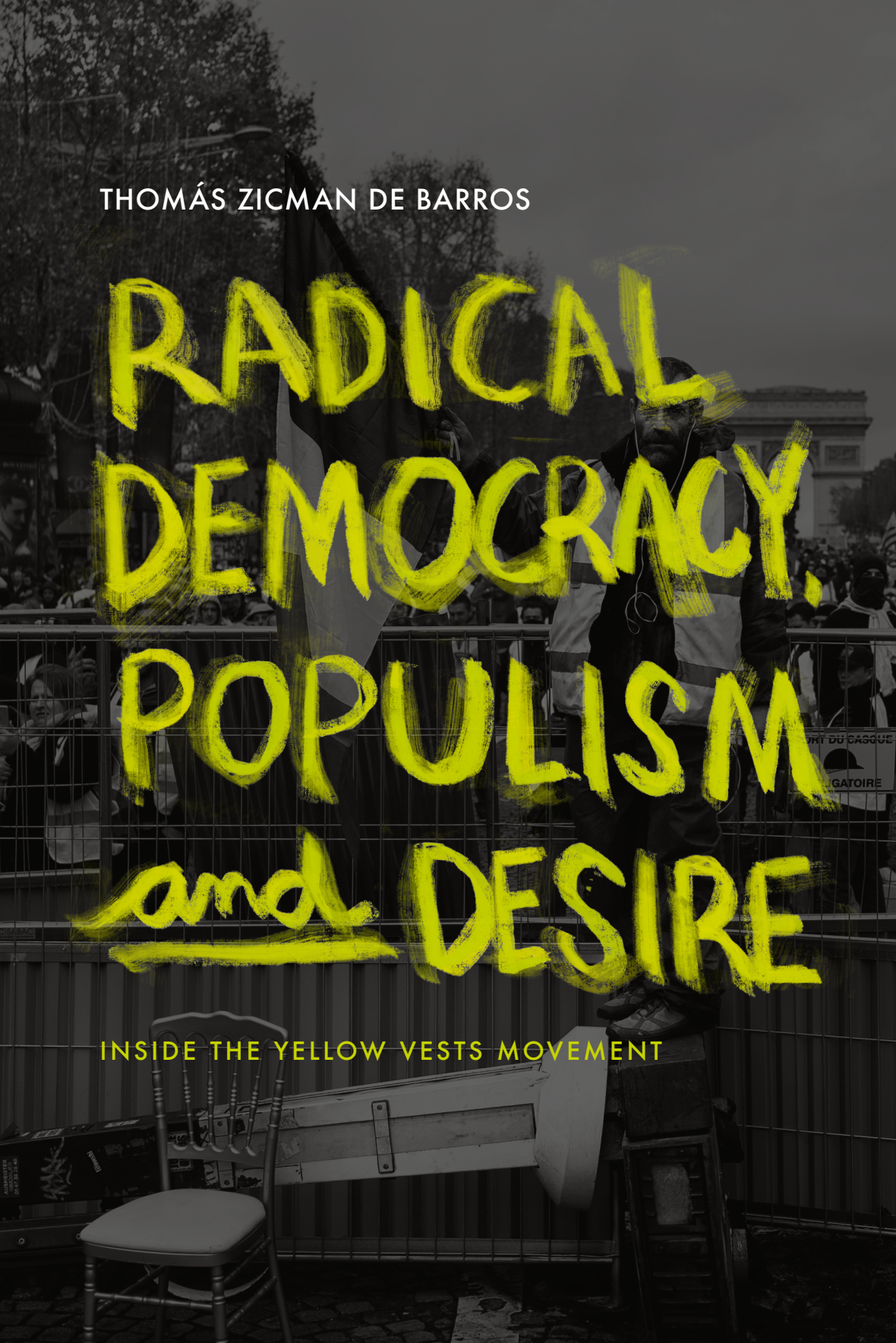

THOMÁS ZICMAN DE BARROS

RADICAL DEMOCRACY, POPULISM and DESIRE

INSIDE THE YELLOW VESTS MOVEMENT

Radical Democracy, Populism and Desire

In memory of Bernardo René Zicman

Radical Democracy, Populism and Desire

Inside the Yellow Vests Movement

Thomás Zicman de Barros

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Introduction: The Yellow Vests enigma

On 17 November 2018, France was shaken by the emergence of an unprecedented movement. This was the first *journée de colère* – the so-called 'day of choler' or 'day of anger' – of the *Gilets jaunes*, the Yellow Vests. For some, this uprising was unthinkable. It stunned President Emmanuel Macron, the government, the political class, the trade unions, the pundits and the academics. To use a psychoanalytic category, it was the irruption of the 'real' in democracy – the outbreak of something at the margins of the symbolic order, something that cannot be predicted or adequately named. As such, it triggered a heated debate among those attempting to interpret it. Years later, it remains an enigma, a sphinx awaiting decipherment.

From the very start, the Yellow Vests movement was puzzling. It defied easy classification within the traditional left–right political spectrum. It brought together a broad and seemingly incoherent array of people – so much so that many could only describe it as 'populist', grappling with the elusiveness of this term in everyday language. Perhaps this term, trending in contemporary politics and hyped in the mainstream media, was indeed surprisingly accurate and revealing. But what does this label reveal about how the movement should be judged? Is populism inherently positive or negative? Or, to move beyond moralistic discourse, is it an ethical stance or not?

The demonstrators called for democracy – some even demanded a 'real' democracy. But what kind of democracy was this? Was it a democracy of the 'real', of those on the margins of society? The uprising was also described as 'radical', as composed by the 'radical' fringes of politics. Radical democracy, then? (Jeanpierre 2019, 127, 140–41). But what does that mean? Although radical democracy has taken different forms over the past century, it has remained tied to the idea that nothing is fixed – everything is subject to change, and

the way people live in the world is not grounded in any absolute law or will, whether divine, human or natural. Was this the case with the Yellow Vests? Did this movement invoke democracy to challenge the established order, destabilise naturalised hierarchies and expand the horizons of equality and inclusion? Or was it, as some would argue, a resentful and fanatical mob? Perhaps it was both at once. Why not?

The messy set of questions outlined above haunted me for a few months after the Yellow Vests began. This book seeks to answer them. It does so, however, by taking a different approach – one that looks at the movement from the inside, and from the inside of those who made it up. Indeed, the references to psychoanalysis are not merely present in a play on words in the book's first paragraph – between the protesters' claim for a 'real' democracy and Jacques Lacan's concept of the 'real'. This is a psychosocial study driven by psychoanalytic inquiry. It seeks to understand the collective identities forged within the movement, exploring the nuances of their populist character and their relationship to radical democracy.

This study does not simply apply a pre-existing theory of populism to assess the Yellow Vests' collective identities, nor does it predetermine a model of radical democracy against which the movement will be judged. Rather, the approach is the opposite. The inquiry into the Yellow Vests' collective identities serves as a means of critically engaging with dominant theories, ultimately working towards a new understanding of populism, democracy and its radicalisation. The verdict on the success of this endeavour is, of course, up to the reader.

The shortest introduction to the Yellow Vests

What exactly were the Yellow Vests? They can be seen as the final chapter in a wave of protests that began in 2011, often referred to as the 'indignation' movements or the 'movements of the squares'. These earlier protests were largely urban and, with few exceptions, attracted participants from a limited left-leaning ideological spectrum (Thomassen and Prentoulis 2014, 224; Zicman de Barros 2020, 522). The Yellow Vests, however, took on a distinctive character. While the demonstrations in Paris were striking, it was evident from the outset that this was not a movement centred on major cities. Instead, it was driven by rural areas, with different dynamics unfolding across the country. Talking about *the* Yellow Vests movement in the singular is a challenge because it was very decentralised, with different dynamics across the country. Nevertheless, it is possible to tell a common story of this mobilisation.

The movement's origins can be traced back several months before its first large-scale demonstrations on the streets, roads and roundabouts of France. It all began on 29 May 2018, when Priscillia Ludosky, a thirty-two-year-old black saleswoman from Seine-et-Marne, started an online petition against rising fuel prices and, in particular, to challenge the carbon tax.[1] In the three years before the protests, the price of a litre of diesel had risen by almost 50%, from an average of €1.03 in January 2016 to €1.52 in October 2018. While these fluctuations were partly influenced by the international market, taxes accounted for a significant 60% of the fuel price, sparking discontent among drivers. In particular, Ludosky harboured concerns about the government's September 2017 announcement of a new plan to gradually increase the carbon tax. Originally introduced in France in 2014 to curb fossil fuel consumption and mitigate their harmful effects on climate change, the tax was now seen by many as an unfair financial burden. In her petition, Ludosky clearly expressed her support for energy transition measures but argued that drivers should not foot the bill. Instead, she advocated for government subsidies to make low-emission vehicles more accessible.

Although Ludosky played a key role in drawing attention to rising fuel prices, she later stated on 22 November 2018 that the Yellow Vests movement was initiated by two 'apolitical and non-unionised citizens'. She was referring to Éric Drouet, a thirty-three-year-old lorry driver also hailing from Seine-et-Marne. Despite his previous involvement in a local tuning club, which focused on meetings for car enthusiasts, Drouet had no prior history of political activism. Yet, as fuel prices continued to rise throughout the year, his frustration grew. In early October 2018, during an informal conversation with a fellow member of his tuning club, he decided to use the group as a platform to organise a protest. His initial plan was to stage a demonstration on the Parisian ring road on 17 November 2018, and he announced the call to action on 10 October 2018.

Ludosky and Drouet were not the only key figures of the movement. Throughout this book, I will mention other central actors – such as Jacline Mouraud, Maxime Nicolle, Jérôme Rodrigues, Ingrid Levavasseur and François Boulo – analysing some of their discourses and, in the first appendix, providing a more detailed account of their roles and relationships. As I discuss there, it is striking that the so-called 'mainstream media', often singled out by protesters as a prime target, played a central role in the genesis and shaping of the Yellow Vests movement. Without the mainstream media, the initiatives

[1] Ludosky, Priscillia. 2018. 'Pour une baisse des prix du carburant à la pompe!' *Change.org*, 29 May 2018.

of Ludosky and Drouet would probably have remained apart and confined to small circles. Yet it was through a small newspaper from Seine-et-Marne that Drouet ended up discovering Ludosky's petition, as she had contacted the local media to give her cause visibility. This connection led them to join forces and, on 15 October 2018, create the Facebook group *La France en colère* – a key turning point in the mobilisation.

The mainstream media would play an even more important role in promoting their cause in the weeks that followed. Their efforts gained national visibility on 21 October 2018, when an important national newspaper interviewed Ludosky. In this interview, she said that she was in contact with a car association and that they were calling for a national movement on 17 November 2018. On the very same day, Drouet reformulated his initial online call for demonstrations, inviting the people not only to demonstrate on the Parisian ring road on 17 November but to block the roads all across France.

As other newspapers picked up Ludosky's interview, their mobilisation went viral. Her petition, which had just over 12,000 signatures by 21 October, soared. In the following weeks, it averaged more than 60,000 new signatures per day. By 16 November, the day before the first *journée de colère*, it had gathered 860,000 supporters. The number reached one million by 29 November and levelled off at 1.2 million by mid-January 2019. At the same time, Facebook saw a dizzying proliferation of new groups aligning with

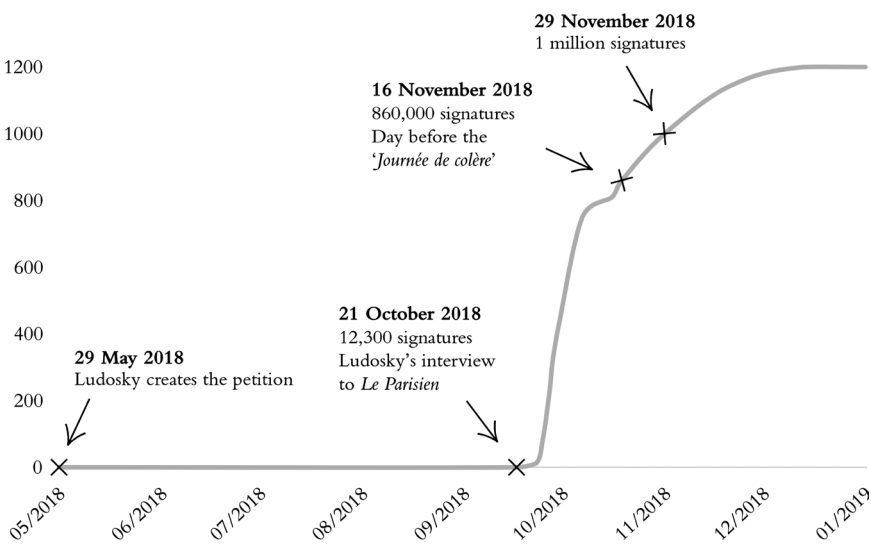

Figure I.1 Total number of signatures on Ludosky's online petition (in thousands).

Source: Data gathered from various media outlets.

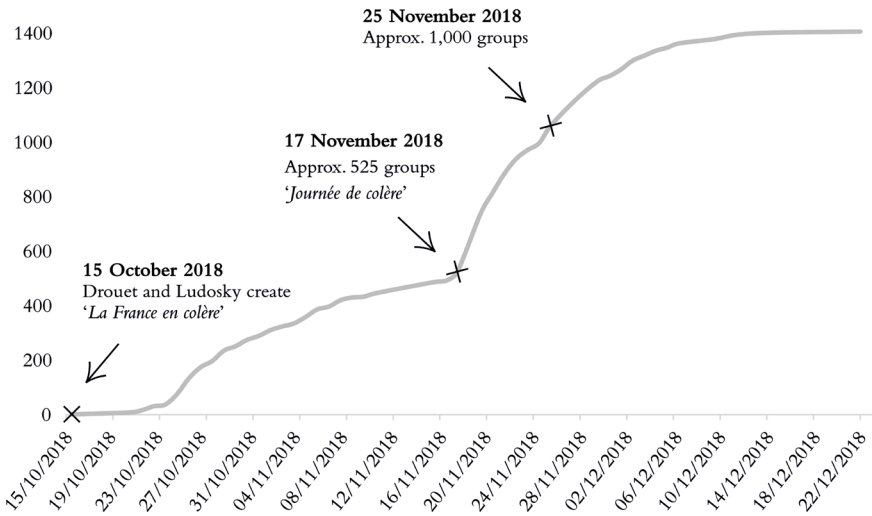

Figure I.2 Non-exhaustive aggregated number of Yellow Vests Facebook groups.

Source: Facebook.

the movement, driving a highly decentralised mobilisation on social media to organise marches across France.

The idea of using a yellow vest as a symbol of the movement emerged on 24 October 2018. It came from digital social media, in a video posted at 6 pm by Ghislain Coutard, a thirty-six-year-old technician from Occitanie.[2] Since 2008, the high-visibility vest has been a compulsory safety feature in all French cars. Coutard suggested that demonstrators wear the yellow vest or place it on the dashboard of their car to show their support for the mobilisation. Within three hours, his video had been viewed 200,000 times. By the eve of the first *journée de colère*, it had surpassed five million views.

On 17 November, armed with their yellow vests, the demonstrators moved from the digital social media to the streets. The French police estimated that 288,000 people took part in this first demonstration – a figure that protesters say is grossly underestimated. Many did not return home after the marches but instead began occupying roundabouts across France. From that point on, the movement took on a threefold dynamic: mobilisation on social media, weekly Saturday marches in major cities, and daily occupations and assemblies on roundabouts throughout the country.

[2] Coutard, Ghislain. 2018. 'Je veux voir un maximum de gilets jaunes sur les tableaux de bord pour le 17 novembre 2018'. *Facebook*, 24 October 2018, https://tinyurl.com/yellow-vests-20181024.

While the demonstrations in large cities were significant, the Yellow Vests movement differed from other 'movements of the squares' in that it was not concentrated in the heart of urban centres. Instead, it was rooted in rural areas and the outskirts of cities – in parts of France often described as 'forgotten' by the authorities, where reliance on cars, the movement's original focus, is far greater.

Yet, as the movement evolved, so did its agenda. What began as a protest against the carbon tax and declining purchasing power expanded into a broader call for democracy – for what protesters termed a 'real' democracy. From 6 December onwards, a new slogan took to the streets: *Référendum d'initiative citoyenne* (RIC), or Citizens' Initiative Referendum. The RIC not only helped bridge divides within the movement but also embodied a central leitmotif of the demonstrators – the belief that the 'people' should exercise their sovereignty directly, without representatives.

The 'people' that the movement purported to express had a fundamental antagonist: the government, which was perceived as an ally to economic and administrative elites and whose main function was to parasitise the workers. For the Yellow Vests, President Macron has effectively become the ultimate symbol of these 'elites'. He would be the embodiment of the establishment. Macron emerged in politics as a candidate simultaneously – '*en même temps*', as he liked to say in an unconventional French expression – of the left and the right. As such, he was a synthesis of the politicians who have governed France in recent decades. Yet his rhetoric was one of radical transformation, even of revolutionising subjectivities (Revault d'Allonnes 2021, 22–23). His primary objective was to instil a profound '*changement culturel*' – a cultural shift that would redefine France itself.

At the core of Macron's vision was a belief that France's economy was rigid and ill-equipped to meet twenty-first-century challenges. Despite a series of reforms over recent decades, France retained one of the most developed welfare systems in Europe. To Macron, however, it was a nation of privilege, where people did not work enough, relied too heavily on the state, and complained a lot. During his election campaign, he championed the idea of transforming France into a 'start-up nation' – a vibrant, innovative, bottom-up market, underpinned by a discourse in which entrepreneurship and merit served as key signifiers. Once in power, on 16 October 2017, he invoked the theory of '*premiers de cordée*' (lead climbers), arguing that society should reject envy and jealousy and instead celebrate talented, innovative entrepreneurs who pave the way for collective prosperity (Revault d'Allonnes 2021, 77–80). In his discourse, these figures stood in stark contrast to those dependent on social welfare, whom he singled out as a burden on the state – people for whom the

government spent '*un pognon de dingue*' (a crazy amount of money) yet who fail to break out of the poverty trap.

Macron's zeal for liberalising reforms and his uncomplimentary style quickly became a source of discontent. At first, he seemed to restore a sense of authority and stature – a lost dignity – to the presidency. However, his tenure soon became notorious for squabbles in the streets with ordinary citizens who dared to challenge him (Monod 2018, §4; Le Bart 2020, 146). For over a year, though, the opposition to Macron struggled to find a voice in the traditional forums of politics. It was only with the eruption of the Yellow Vests that his presidency came under siege.

Yet, although the movement succeeded in channelling pent-up discontent against Macron into a powerful initial mobilisation, it quickly lost momentum. Unlike other 'indignation' demonstrations of the past fifteen years – where participation often swelled as protests gained traction – the Yellow Vests never again reached the turnout levels of 17 November. Police estimated that by the second Saturday of protests, on 24 November, the number of demonstrators across France had dropped to 166,000, with participation continuing to dwindle each week. Protesters disputed these figures, but even they conceded a sharp decline in engagement throughout November and December. In such a fluid movement, shaped in part by 'weak ties' (Gerbaudo 2012, 30–31, 146) and ongoing debates over what it means to *be* a Yellow Vest, engagement cannot be measured solely by marches. Still, turnout remains a useful gauge of momentum, and by this measure it steadily faded.

Part of this decline can be explained by the fact that many of the Yellow Vests were newcomers, with no prior experience in sustained demonstrations, making them difficult to mobilise over the long term in successive weekly marches. The movement's staunch rejection of institutionalisation also undermined its longevity. Furthermore, deep ideological and strategic divisions – both at the leadership level and within the grassroots – exposed the impossibility of an immanent and indisputable expression of the popular will. Uncertainty over the movement's identity and direction, combined with infighting, ultimately escalated into a real pitched battle between factions in Lyon on 9 February 2019.

The government's response, oscillating between concessions and repression, also played a key role in weakening the movement. On the concessions front, the government announced on 4 December that it would postpone the carbon tax increase for six months – a delay extended indefinitely the following day. On 10 December, Macron unveiled a series of urgent social and economic measures aimed at boosting purchasing power. A week later, on

18 December 2018, he announced plans for a major national debate on environmental policy, taxation and democracy. At the same time, however, the government did not hesitate to employ force against demonstrators. Following the riots on the Champs-Élysées on 5 December 2018, images of looting at the Arc de Triomphe were broadcast relentlessly by twenty-four-hour news channels, framing the movement as 'violent' and undermining its legitimacy. The intensification of police brutality further discouraged participation in protests. Finally, the forced eviction of demonstrators from roundabouts between December and January dealt another significant blow to the movement's momentum.

The shortest introduction to psychosocial analysis

This summary presentation of the Yellow Vests only incites more questions about the uprising. How did this movement come about? Where did it draw its strength from? And how should it be judged? Is it populism at all? And what about its dimension of radical democracy, of challenging naturalised hierarchies? This is where the value of a psychosocial approach becomes evident – one that delves into the fantasies, affects and libidinal bonds that shaped and sustained the movement.

At first glance, one might question the relevance of a psychosocial study, especially one informed by psychoanalysis. After all, psychoanalysis was once described by Sigmund Freud ([1923] 1955, 235, 250) as a method for the treatment of psychic disorders, which might imply that psychoanalytic research is concerned only with the traumas of the particular subject and has nothing to do with the collective sphere. Yet this criticism is misleading. Freud ([1921] 1955, 69; [1917] 1963, 271–72) himself had blurred the distinction between the subjective and the collective levels, and openly expressed the will to 'bridge the gap' between psychoanalysis and other approaches in the humanities (Freud [1913] 1955, xiii). In addition, almost a third of Freud's writings are concerned with social phenomena. In these works, he used psychoanalytic tools to examine society and, conversely, was informed by social questions to formulate his theories on the subject.

Since Freud, various currents have flourished in what might be called a pluralistic 'psychoanalytic political theory' (Stavrakakis 2020, 1). Among the various strands, authors such as Slavoj Žižek have articulated politics and psychoanalysis drawing on the contributions of Lacan. In the same vein, Ernesto Laclau (2005, ix) updates Freud's reflections on mass psychology, using Lacanian psychoanalysis to explore issues such as populism, collective identities and radical democracy. This Lacanian tradition serves as the primary inspiration

for this book, which also benefits from the seminal work of Jason Glynos (2021, 5; 2014, 187), Yannis Stavrakakis (2020, 9–11) and others contributing to the emerging field of 'critical fantasy studies'. By blurring the boundaries of established fields of inquiry, these efforts at interdisciplinary articulation are not frictionless but they are teeming with promise. Lacan's perspective is particularly fruitful in developing the articulation between the subjective and the collective precisely because of the centrality it gives to the idea of discourse. It is worth emphasising that, while the entry into language is central to shaping the subject's development, it is not limited to the subjective level. Language is a collective phenomenon, a key element of socialisation. Language is ruled by a symbolic order that is collective. It influences the norms and ideals of subjects, their anguishes and fantasies.

This book argues that discourse was a central element in the mobilisation of the Yellow Vests. Surprising uprisings and moments of profound political rupture are never the simple result of the mechanical unfolding of some underlying dynamics. They rely heavily on discursive transformations, and to some extent can only be adequately understood by taking discourse into account (Žižek 1998, 14; Stavrakakis 2019, 197). As seen above, Ludosky's petition against the carbon tax, despite dealing with an issue that directly affected citizens' pockets, only ignited the streets and roundabouts of France when it came under the spotlight of the press and, in a combined but also tense way, of digital social media. The dynamics of communication were therefore extremely important for the movement. But communication is not only about the means. The content of the discourse is also central. In a thought-provoking commentary on the Yellow Vests, Quentin Ravelli (2020, 268) points out that the movement was interpreted from day one by academics and the media. Going beyond Ravelli, it is worth pointing out that the movement was interpreted from within, by the protesters themselves, and that it was the protesters' discourses, with their fantasies and affects, that drove the mobilisation. These discourses played a role in the constitution of the movement, the construction of its image, its identities and, consequently, its dynamics.

To study the discourses shaping the Yellow Vests' collective identities, I decided not only to focus on their expression in manifestos, open letters by key figures, social media interactions and other materials but also to go on the ground. Puzzled by the movement as it was happening, I mobilised a network of contacts, bought a train ticket and a yellow vest, and travelled to the south of France to study it in a new way: through psychosocial interviews with protesters. Based on the articulation between political theory and psychoanalysis, this methodology seeks to draw connections between each protester's personal trajectory and their political engagement. I conducted interviews with

twenty demonstrators in a town that I have called Jaunet to preserve the anonymity of the interviewees.

Jaunet is a town of 12,500 inhabitants, surrounded by twenty other smaller towns that form an urban unit of 40,000 people. In the 2017 election, the voting profile in the town was fairly close to the national average – except for abstention, which was 8% higher than in France as a whole. Half of my interviews were with women and half with men, of different ages. Of all my interviewees, only one claimed to have voted for Macron in the first round in 2017. A third of the people I interviewed had a history of activism or were radical left voters. Another third had voted for far-right candidates. The remaining third were abstainers. The interviews lasted between one and a half and two hours. I went to Jaunet twice. The first set of ten demonstrators was interviewed in the week when the movement had celebrated six months of existence. A second series of ten demonstrators was interviewed in the week of the movement's first anniversary.

The advantage of the psychosocial interview is that it goes beyond the simple collection of statistical data or an approach limited to the analysis of documents, both of which are susceptible to bias. Not only does this method allow for a comprehensive analysis of the prevailing fantasies within a movement but it also delves into the type of affective investment in the movement made by the demonstrators interviewed and the identification processes involved. Some might argue that twenty or so interviews obviously cannot be generalised to an entire movement (Hollway and Jefferson 2000, 79–80, 104–5). However, there are other hermeneutical and epistemological bases for this type of study. Psychosocial interviews help to formulate hypotheses retroductively. In other words, they can transform the very way in which researchers conceive their theory (Glynos and Howarth 2007, 204; 2008, 165). Moreover, insofar as the retroductive approach underlying psychosocial interviews blurs the boundary between the formulation of a theory and its empirical justification, it is even possible to generalise from particular cases if they are persuasively presented as enlightening and paradigmatic – as I argue was the case in this study.

Book outline

To investigate the collective identities constructed in the Yellow Vests movement, this book is divided into three parts. The first part is dedicated to presenting this movement by introducing a double reflection that will run throughout the work: a reflection on populism and radical democracy. The first chapter critically evaluates the label 'populism' that has been applied to the movement. The chapter takes up the main critical currents in populism

studies – notably the discursive approach, which sees populism as the discursive construction of the 'people' against the 'elites', and what is often called the stylistic, performative or sociocultural approach, which emphasises the transgressive nature of populism, for example in the way populist leaders are badly behaved, breaking with the normal way of doing politics. In the tension between these two approaches, the chapter argues that the Yellow Vests have something to teach about populism. Beyond the discursive opposition of the 'people' against the 'elites', capable of evoking fantasies that give strength to the movement, the Yellow Vests were populist because they mobilised subaltern sectors, the so-called '*France oubliée*' (forgotten France). They were therefore transgressive in another sense: the so-called aesthetic transgression. The notion of aesthetics used here comes from Jacques Rancière and concerns what is seen and what is not seen in politics. It is argued that the populism of the Yellow Vests would be aesthetically transgressive because, by constructing an identity of the 'people' against the 'elites', it would promote the entry into politics of marginalised, invisible, subalternised, heterogeneous sectors – an expression of the Lacanian 'real'.

The second chapter introduces the debate on the relationship between the Yellow Vests and the tradition of radical democracy. I will reconstruct the main contributions of this current of thought, with names such as Hannah Arendt and Claude Lefort, as well as Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, who in turn draw from authors such as Martin Heidegger, Antonio Gramsci and Georges Bataille. I will argue that, notwithstanding the profound differences that can exist between the key authors in the radical democratic tradition, they all face similar tensions between, on the one hand, the enthusiastic celebration of movements that seek to act joyfully and transform the world and, on the other, the ever-present peril of this enthusiasm degenerating into ideological closure, moralism and fanaticism. I argue that the mere political inclusion of previously invisible groups, as promoted by populism, is insufficient to establish the Yellow Vests as a radically democratic movement. Instead, their transgressive aesthetic must undergo aesthetic judgement to determine its ethical character – specifically, whether the collective identities shaped by populism cultivate an awareness of the radical contingency of entrenched social hierarchies and practices.

The second part of the book focuses on refining the framework for assessing the radical democratic nature of the Yellow Vests through psychosocial analysis. The third chapter analyses the symbol of the movement: the high-visibility vest. Here I discuss a key but at the same time puzzling concept in discourse theory: the concept of an empty signifier. I will show that the polysemy of this notion is not a weakness. On the contrary, the main innovation of this critical

revision of the notion of empty signifier is to show how different modes of identification were able to coexist among the Yellow Vests. In the course of the argument, I will show that each use of the concept of empty signifier can be applied to think about a dimension of the Yellow Vests, such as the fratricidal disputes within the movement – for instance the street clashes that took place in Lyon – the confrontations with its opponents – such as Macron – and the movement's relationship to an ethics of radical democracy.

Chapter 4 presents my first psychosocial interviews with some Yellow Vests, in particular a young man called Gabriel. These interviews led me to understand that there was something more – or perhaps something less – than concrete demands at the heart of collective mobilisation. Introducing key psychoanalytic concepts such as drive, fantasy, enjoyment and affect, I argue that desire is the main category at play in processes of identification. Desire, for Lacan, is implicit in demands and involves the will to be seen, recognised and loved by the other. This resonates with the very symbol of the Yellow Vests movement – the high-visibility vest – which expresses the desire to capture others' gaze. It also resonates with the statement by Drouet that 'it is all a matter of image' made when he was arrested for disobedience. Thus, I argue that among the Yellow Vests a desire for belonging and recognition took precedence over concrete demands and had many political consequences. But, while desire is key to understanding political identification, I raise the question of the limits of the dynamics of desire in thinking about emancipatory politics.

The third and final part of the book analyses different processes of identification that coexisted among the Yellow Vests based on two psychoanalytic metaphors related to populism. Chapter 5 analyses metaphors that describe the Yellow Vests as a symptom of some deeper problems in French politics, and articulates them with the accounts of various political theorists, notably Chantal Mouffe, Benjamin Arditi and Paula Biglieri, who have suggested that populism would be a by-product of a post-democratic context. Populism would be a symptom precisely because it is the return of the repressed, which is Freud's original definition of symptom. The Yellow Vests, in this sense, would be the return of the repressed, a symptom of Macron's post-democratic discourse. However, unlike those who see this symptomatic irruption as radical democratic, I argue that this metaphor leads to populism appearing as a morbid symptom at the antipodes of radical democracy. It feeds into a sceptical tradition in revolt studies that tends to see radical protests as involving fanatical, thoughtless processes of identification.

Based on a series of psychosocial interviews with protesters, Chapter 6 presents an alternative form of political identification that is close to reflections linking populism to another psychoanalytic metaphor: sublimation. Through a

recap of Freud's and Lacan's reflections on sublimation, I show that this notion allows one to think about radical democratic modes of identification. From this perspective, I can provide a partial answer to the main question of the book. Indeed, from my psychosocial interviews, it can be argued that some expressions of the Yellow Vests' populism were radically democratic as their references to the 'people' sustained a non-saturated symbolic order, an open identity, implying different dynamics for ethics, aesthetics and enjoyment.

The conclusion of the book shows that the enigmatic character of the Yellow Vests stems from the fact that they mobilised subalternised sectors, whose entry into politics was transgressive and shocking, but also from the fact that different modes of identification coexisted around the same symbol – a high-visibility vest. The movement, therefore, demonstrates that populism is plural and complex, capable of taking different forms and mobilising diverse discourses. Most strikingly, these differences can manifest simultaneously within the same movement, generating the tensions that characterise protest dynamics.

As should be clear by now, psychoanalysis plays a large part in this book. However, this is still a book of political theory written by a non-psychoanalyst. As such, I try hard to be clear and avoid obscure psychoanalytic jargon. I will of course discuss concepts such as desire and drive, as well as symptom and sublimation to distinguish between undemocratic and radical democratic modes of identification. I will also return in more detail to Lacan's notion of the 'real' – that which cannot be symbolised and exposes the radical contingency of the world – to show how it emerges in different interpretations of Yellow Vests. Nevertheless, I try to introduce each concept intuitively, not only because it is important for the reader but also because it is important for me. Having studied psychoanalysis for several years now, I know very well what it is like to open one of Lacan's texts and feel lost. I try to be clear in my presentation of psychoanalytic concepts because this shows my path to understanding them. In this way, I hope to provide a path for others to follow in studies that articulate political theory and psychoanalysis. I cannot promise that I will always succeed in being clear – there is irreducible complexity in Lacan's teaching – but I can assure the reader that I have tried.

Some of the ideas presented here have already been developed to varying degrees and in different forms in previous publications. Their current format and articulation, however, are brand new, and many of the issues raised here have been thoroughly reworked over time and under the influence of new reflections.

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1

Were the Yellow Vests populists?

When the Yellow Vests movement erupted, the word populism attached itself to it like a reflex. The cover of a major magazine crystallised this association with a striking image: Eugène Delacroix's *La Liberté guidant le peuple*, but this time the allegory of freedom wore a yellow vest. Above, a bold inscription declared: 'All populists!' (*Tous populistes!*) (Zicman de Barros 2023, 239).

No need for suspense – I agree that the Yellow Vests movement was indeed populist. Yet the term, so confidently deployed, remains elusive. Released into the public sphere, it drifts, shape-shifting in the hands of those who wield it. Over the past decade, a populist hype has unfolded, stretching the word to its limits, affixing it to almost every political actor in the pages of the press. But this inflation of the term is not confined to journalism. Academia itself has been drawn into the fervour and, even among scholars, discord reigns. The concept of populism, it is said, is 'essentially contested' – a phrase that signals not just disagreement but an intrinsic impossibility of consensus.

This elusiveness is no accident. It is inscribed within the word itself, weighted with a normative charge that shapes its trajectory. Though not always the case, in recent years, populism has become a frightful hobgoblin, a tainted, accursed signifier, burdened with a pejorative aura, something to be named only to be disavowed.

But what, exactly, does it name? Populism remains an enigma. It designates something amorphous, something unsettling – perhaps even something monstrous. Should the term, then, be abandoned? On the contrary. Its enigmatic nature is not a defect of definition, nor merely a result of rhetorical slippage. Rather, it belongs to the very thing it seeks to describe. To grasp populism, one must confront its opacity, its capacity to unsettle and elude. It refers not

merely to a political phenomenon but to a rupture in the symbolic order, something that resists domestication by discourse.

Here, Lacan offers a useful lens. If populism provokes anguish, if it is spoken about as something dangerous, something impossible to contain in words, then perhaps it belongs to what Lacan called the 'real'. The 'real' appears early in Lacan's work and undergoes multiple transformations throughout his teaching: it has been used to describe psychotic breaks, the irreducible lack that traverses the subject, a traumatic moment of rupture, the force of the drive, and even the material resistance of the signifier itself. Beneath this apparent incoherence, a common thread emerges: the 'real' always gestures towards an experience that defies symbolic capture (Safatle 2020, 37–38). It names that which discourse cannot assimilate, the fractures and fissures within the very order that seeks to impose meaning.

Populism, in this sense, belongs to that category of things that persist as a remainder, something that refuses full incorporation, something that haunts the symbolic edifice of democracy itself. Any attempt to understand it must begin by acknowledging its resistance to being fully understood.

Populism as aesthetic transgression

In the realm of political theory, critical populism studies have emerged as the most compelling framework for understanding populism as an emanation of the 'real' – a claim I make particularly in the case of the Yellow Vests. It is no coincidence that one of the key figures in this tradition, Laclau, was profoundly influenced by the writings of Lacan. As Laclau (2005a, ix) states in the very first sentence of his most famous work, populism is, above all, a way of constructing collective identities – a process that, unsurprisingly, resonates deeply with psychoanalysis. I argue that this process of identity formation is precisely what allows the 'real' in its Lacanian sense to emerge.

If the 'real' is what defies symbolisation, then aesthetics becomes a crucial site of inquiry. Drawing on Laclau, but also engaging with various strands of critical populism studies, I define populism as a transgressive aesthetics (Zicman de Barros and Lago 2022, 92, 115; Zicman de Barros and Aiolfi 2025a, 6).

The notion of aesthetics employed here is directly influenced by Rancière (2000b, 27, 71–72). Contrary to common assumptions, aesthetics, for Rancière, is not about ornamentation, superficial embellishment or a cosmetic layer of reality. Nor is it confined to the realm of the arts or limited to bodily stylistic performances. Instead, Rancière (2000b, 12) defines it as '*partage du sensible*' – the distribution, or partition, of the sensible.

At its core, returning to the very etymology of the term, aesthetics concerns receptivity, sensitiveness. It is about the aptitude to be affected, to register impressions and to respond to them – an idea that also aligns with psychoanalytic thought. It is not only about what can be seen and felt but also about what remains imperceptible, what is systematically excluded from perception.

For Rancière, politics itself is fundamentally an aesthetic struggle, a battle over perception – over what can and cannot appear in the public sphere. The disputes over interests, values and identities, often seen as the foundation of politics, are ultimately disputes over what is allowed to be seen and what remains obscured. The visible and the invisible.

Populism, I claim, is precisely what unsettles this order – it disturbs and transgresses the rules of the *partage du sensible*. It brings the 'real', situated at the internal margins of the symbolic, into the public sphere. And, precisely because of this, it is perceived as a threat. To explain how populism disrupts the aesthetic coordinates of society, however, it is first necessary to take a step back and outline the theoretical foundations of critical populism studies.

Radical contingent identities

In the introduction to this book, I referred to Ravelli's (2020, 268) comment on the Yellow Vests. He noted that the movement was interpreted from the outset by both academics and the media, and I argued that the movement itself also engaged in its own interpretation. However, it is important to highlight that his comment seems to inadvertently introduce another issue: the implicit separation of interpretations from the movement itself.

Critical scholars of populism identify two key problems with this reading. First, drawing on Laclau and Mouffe's (1987, 82) discourse theory, they reject the separation between discourse and the external world – a distinction that, for example, persists in Michel Foucault's (1969, 73) work. Instead, they contend that discourse encompasses all that carries meaning. Since both words and practices hold meaning, everything is discursive. In this sense, discourses about the movement do not exist on a separate level but are co-extensive with the movement itself (Laclau 1980, 87). The discourse of the Yellow Vests is not limited to their slogans, manifestos or digital communications, or to statements made in assemblies and occupations. The occupation itself is a discursive act (Butler 2015, 49). Wearing a yellow vest is a discursive gesture – a signifier. Even physical confrontations with the police are also discursive – as they too carry meaning.

The second issue is the implicit assumption that reality precedes discourse, as though discourse merely names something that already exists, being grounded

on an ultimate foundation underpinning it. Drawing from psychoanalysis, particularly Lacan ([1973] 2016, 43), discourse theorists reject this idea and argue that naming plays a constitutive role in shaping reality. 'The name becomes the ground of the thing', as Laclau (2005a, 100) says. Identity and political subjectivity are not pre-given but emerge through discourse, through symbols. As discussed in the introduction, discourses were crucial to the mobilisation and formation of the Yellow Vests. When populism names the 'people' versus the 'elite', it constructs political subjects.

Furthermore, as this example suggests, discourse theorists understand that meaning is relational: the identity of the 'people' does not derive from a direct connection between this signifier and an actually existing people but from its contrast with other signifiers – such as 'elite'. In this sense, the identity of the Yellow Vests is not only constructed through a shared experience but also through their naming, which establishes relationships between the movement and other political actors. For example, their antagonism towards Macron and the 'elites' he represents is central in defining who the Yellow Vests are. In other words, it is through the presence of others – through the recognition of something outside oneself – that I am able to define my own identity.

This understanding is crucial, as it introduces a key concept for this work, to which I will return in particular in the following chapters: radical contingency. If meaning is relational and not solidly grounded, then things can be otherwise – radically otherwise (Mouffe 2013, 10). If meaning is conventional, so too is one's identity.

Grasping this can be anguish-provoking. In fact, I will return to the theme of anguish repeatedly throughout this book. Anguish, as Lacan ([1963] 2004, 92) argues, is 'the only affect that does not deceive'. It does not deceive because it is felt when one confronts the fact that one's identity is vulnerable, haunted by the spectre of dissolution. What one believes constitutes their identity can vanish in the haze. Identities do not solely depend on the self (Butler 2001, 33–35). Freud's ([1917] 1963, 285) main discovery was that identity is not something possessed or fully controlled by the subject. Although the subject seeks a stable identity that places them at the centre of the world, they are ultimately ontologically decentred.

Hegemony and the social

For years, the yellow high-visibility vest was an ordinary object, tucked away in glove compartments and largely forgotten. And, for years, nothing happened. Then, on 9 January 2018, the French government announced a reduction in speed limits on national roads from 90 km/h to 80 km/h. And, for

months, still, nothing happened. On 20 May 2018, a new directive raised the costs of vehicle inspection tests by an average of 15% to 20%, introducing additional fees for previously free second tests. Yet, even as fuel prices climbed – diesel increasing by almost 50% in just two and a half years – nothing seemed to happen. The carbon tax, designed to curb CO_2 emissions, had been in place since 2014 and was set to accelerate, yet its effects remained largely unchallenged. Dissatisfaction flickered here and there, but for the most part it failed to coalesce. Even Ludosky's petition, circulating for nearly six months, struggled to gain traction. Nothing happened. More importantly, nothing was expected to happen.

This inertia – the long lull before the Yellow Vests storm – offers a revealing entry point into the dynamics of invisibilisation and the potential for its transgression through populism. These dynamics can be better understood through a key distinction in Laclau's (1990, 160) work: that between the social and the political. The social refers to routinised practices embedded in daily life – activities carried out uncritically, almost automatically, in a 'voluntary servitude', as it were. In this sense, the social constitutes 'the terrain of the given' (Norval and Howarth 2014, 2863). This understanding aligns with Gramsci's ([1930] 1996, Q3, §90) concept of hegemony, which Laclau and Mouffe develop within discourse theory. Originally formulated in Marxist thought, hegemony came to signify the capacity to secure acquiescence for a leadership, rendering it legitimate and unquestioned. Among discourse theorists, it is now seen as synonymous with sedimented forms of political order (Laclau [1991] 1996a, 117). In a nutshell, hegemonic discourse is a discourse that succeeds in hiding its own radical contingency and partiality, presenting itself as universal truth.

To attain hegemony, a discourse must provisionally define the terms of public debate, imposing itself as the primary framework through which reality is 'read' (Howarth 2004, 259). It must appear as the only game in town, as the 'common sense', deactivating alternative perspectives (Norval 2007, 112). As Oliver Marchart (2002, 255) notes, 'it defines the very limits of what is thinkable politically', thereby excluding rival projects as unintelligible (Laclau 1981, 73–74; [1993] 1996, 102; Norval 1996, 173).

A contemporary illustration of social logics in operation, of a discourse seeking hegemony, is Macron's post-democratic project in France at the time of the Yellow Vests. The concept of post-democracy, which recurs throughout this analysis, describes a context in which liberal democratic institutions continue to work, yet the decline of traditional class structures leads to an increasingly elite-driven politics. In this setting, democracy is reduced to a carefully managed spectacle of periodic elections: citizens cast their votes but even a

change in leadership – such as the transition from Nicolas Sarkozy to François Hollande – fails to bring about substantive policy shifts. As Mouffe explains, post-democratic discourse seeks to impose a definitive formula for governing human affairs, replacing the government of persons with the administration of things. Macron, one could argue, epitomises this logic (Revault d'Allonnes 2021, 15–16). In this framework, democracy is stripped of its radical potential, reduced to a procedural mechanism with little substantive impact. Political parties, rather than contesting the prevailing order, consolidate it by presenting their policies as technical and scientific necessities, beyond political debate.

Crucially, this approach forecloses any challenge to the existing economic structure. As Mouffe (2018, 4) argues, in recent decades society has been confronted with 'a fate that [it] had to accept … No space was left for the citizens to have a real choice between different political projects'. In short, post-democracy ossifies democracy, neutralising radical alternatives that threaten its supposed consensus.

In the case of France, this hegemonic project operates not only through words but also through actions. When the Yellow Vests challenged Macron, for instance, the government granted concessions in certain areas, yet repression remained central to sustaining its post-democratic hegemony. Dissent was not only delegitimised in speeches but also physically suppressed, as seen in the dismantling of occupations and the policing of protests. Here, the term 'police' takes on the meaning given by Rancière (1996, 173), referring to the maintenance of the social order itself. The violent dispersal of demonstrations exemplifies how social logics function not only to naturalise a particular hegemonic arrangement but also to actively suppress challenges to it.

Populism and the political

If the social refers to hegemonic, sedimented practices and social logics to the policing of these practices, what, then, is the political? In the case of the Yellow Vests, the political manifests as a moment of condensation – a rupture in which latent discontent takes form. It is the moment when what had simmered beneath the surface emerges, when something appears precisely where nothing was expected to happen. It is, I claim, a moment of populist transgression.

Laclau (1990, 160) defines the social as the sedimentation of the political – a process through which social practices become naturalised, their radical contingency gradually forgotten. The political, by contrast, emerges in moments of 'reactivation', when the concealed radical contingency underlying dominant, naturalised practices is disclosed (Laclau 1990, 36). This reactivation

aligns with what Arendt ([1958] 1998, 9, 247; [1954] 1994, 319) names as 'new beginnings': ruptures that disrupt the homogeneous, deterministic and *banal* flow of time and human affairs, opening a gap between past and future.[1]

In other words, the political marks the moment when the arbitrary and radically contingent nature of social life is revealed, clearing the way for the institution of new practices from and within the cracks of the symbolic order (Laclau 1999, 146). Laclau (1990, 33) asserts the primacy of the political over the social, arguing that the apparent naturalness of routine practices merely reflects a forgetting of their origins. The political is thus the moment of counter-hegemony – the eruption of the unthinkable and the unintelligible.

Drawing on both Laclau and Rancière, I claim that populism is a key expression of this moment of the political. It unsettles sedimented social practices, disrupting the given order. But how does it accomplish this? According to Laclau (1996, 38; 2005b, 40), populism intervenes by dividing the political field into two antagonistic camps, structured around what he calls empty signifiers: the 'people' versus the 'elites' – although he accepts that any signifiers could fulfil this role.

Yet this utterance is no ordinary act – it is profoundly transgressive. Aesthetically transgressive. To understand how populism challenges the aesthetic rules of visibility, Rancière's (1995, 31) concept of the '*part des sans-part*' (part of no-part) is key. This term refers to those sectors of society rendered invisible, positioned at the margins of the symbolic order. Sectors that could not express themselves in the public sphere, and whose irruption is seen as shocking, unexpected, incomprehensible – in a word: transgressive.

When a populist leader or movement invokes the 'people', they construct this entity in a specific way, incorporating those who were previously excluded – bringing them out of invisibility. This is why, for Laclau (2005a, 123, 150; 2005b, 38), the 'people' of which populism speaks is linked to the idea of the 'underdog'. As Arditi (2019, 57) would say, populism causes an 'exodus from invisibility'. The populist 'people' bring into the public sphere what was silenced, hidden. Through populism, 'the unthinkable' – perceived as 'aberrations' – enters the discourse (Laclau 1985, 84).

With this in mind, the transgressive dimension of the Yellow Vests extends beyond the vivid yellow vests that ruptured the visual landscape. Their occupation of roundabouts and urban streets forced the so-called '*France oubliée*' into public view (Zicman de Barros 2023, 244). Subjects at the margins of the public sphere, previously ignored, suddenly imposed their presence. This

[1] The notion of 'new beginnings' is drawn from Heidegger ([1932] 2016, 76), though Arendt assigns to it a distinct and less contentious meaning.

unsettling intrusion resonates with the Lacanian 'real' – a disturbance that exposes the inconsistencies of the symbolic order.

However, the aesthetic transgression of populism is not confined to the invocation of the 'people'. As Théo Aiolfi insightfully notes in a recent work I collaborated on, there is also an aesthetic transgression at play in the construction of the 'elites' (Zicman de Barros and Aiolfi 2025a, 8–10). It turns out that it is possible to 'aesthetically' read the very rules that define what can appear in politics and what, on the contrary, will be repressed, disavowed, foreclosed, hidden, invisible. What Laclau (1999, 102–3; 2000, 76–77) calls social logics and Rancière (1995, 142; 2000b, 30–31) names the 'police order' are rarely made explicit. The grammar guiding invisibilisation is itself implicit, invisible.

Rancière (1995, 55–56; 2000a, 89–92) has repeatedly emphasised his theoretical divergences from Foucault. Despite these differences, however, Foucault's insights remain valuable here. He demonstrates that the norms governing the *partage du sensible* are not only persistent, self-reproducing and deeply embedded in social practices (Foucault 1976, 122–23) but also that these norms often operate beneath the threshold of visibility, shaping the boundaries of perception and intelligibility without being explicitly articulated (Foucault 1975, 189). Populism, by naming and at times personifying the 'elites', does more than construct an antagonistic frontier – it renders visible the implicit modes of domination that would otherwise remain unspoken.

This process of revelation is evident in the Yellow Vests' nomination of Macron as a political antagonist. By naming Macron, they exposed the unwritten rules that had long structured political exclusion in France. As Salomé Ietter (2025, 11) argues, their mobilisation 'unveiled' the mechanisms of atomisation and dispersion that fragmented workers, as well as the division of labour between representatives and represented, which perpetuated class biases.

Naming the invisible

A key point raised by Ietter has been confirmed in many psychosocial interviews. As will be discussed later in this book, Yellow Vests protesters described their condition before the movement as one of isolation. They were part of a France that was not only 'forgotten' but fragmented, aloof. Exploring these mechanisms of 'atomisation', as Ietter frames them, inevitably leads to a broader intellectual genealogy within continental thought of the last century. The idea of a 'part of no-part' carrying out an aesthetic transgression in the public sphere has roots in several thinkers, many of whom influenced Laclau.

A central concept in this genealogy is the notion of mass. With a long history in political thought, it appears across various traditions, including Marxism

and psychoanalysis. The masses take different forms in Marx's ([1847] 1976, 211; [1852] 1979, 187–89) work. In all cases, however, he distinguishes the mass from the class by its lack of organisation. Unlike a class, which recognises its position and acts collectively – becoming, in Marx's terms, a subject *for-itself* – the mass remains fragmented, lacking both class consciousness and autonomous political organisation. Marx describes the mass as an inorganic social group, a collection of atomised elements without social ties or collective identity. Deprived of organicity and solidarity, the mass is excluded from political processes, unable to assert itself as a coherent force. He illustrates this distinction vividly, stating that the mass constitutes a class no more than a heap of potatoes constitutes a sack of potatoes.

A similar metaphor appears in Lacan (1980, 11): grains of sand on a beach may be numerous and can be piled up, but without symbolic references, no links are established, preventing them from forming a whole. It is Freud, however, who provides a foundational perspective on mass psychology in psychoanalysis. Engaging with his contemporaries, he reformulates and deepens theories of mass formation. Freud ([1921] 1955, 88, 91–92) challenges earlier views that saw the mass as formed through mimicry, instead arguing that it arises from relationships of love – libidinal bonds that unite its members around a leader or an idea. This will be explored further in Chapter 3 in relation to identification processes. In any case, Freud ([1921] 1955, 93) maintains that mass formations consist of a loose collection of disorganised elements. Though the mass can be stabilised, this does not happen autonomously – it requires shared symbols that bring its members together.

Building on insights from various traditions, classical theorists have consistently linked the notion of mass to populism (Zicman de Barros 2024, 6–8). Historically, the expression 'populist sectors' referred to invisible, disorganised social groups excluded from the public sphere (Zicman de Barros and Lago 2022, 52–53). As Laclau (1960, 24–25) observes in his earliest academic work, populism emerges from an available yet invisibilised mass – one that remains so precisely because it lacks the symbolic resources to constitute itself as a political subject.

Although the notion of mass was already present in Laclau's early writings, ideas more closely aligned with the 'part of no-part' – those invisibilised elements that do not fit within the categories structuring hegemonic discourse – began to take shape in his work around the turn of the millennium. These ideas developed in three distinct phases. The first traces back to the early 1990s, when Laclau ([1991] 1996b, 24) critically engaged with G. W. F. Hegel's ([1817] 2007, 248; [1830] 1975, 190) concept of 'peoples without history'. For Hegel, these peoples had no place in the dialectical logic

governing history. Laclau, however, saw them as evidence of an inconsistency in Hegelian theory. As he later argued, these 'blind spots' exposed a fundamental weakness in Hegel's model, revealing an excess that could not be absorbed into it (Laclau 2006, 666).

A more significant influence on Laclau's engagement with non-symbolised excess was Gramsci's concept of subalternity. Writing at the turn of the century, Laclau drew from Gramsci's ([1934] 2021, Q25, §1) reflections on those 'at the margins of history'. While Gramsci's subalterns overlap with Marx's conception of the mass, he goes further, using the term to describe a wide range of excluded groups that do not fit into Marx's principal social classes – or even into the category of class itself. He explicitly identifies race, religion and gender as markers of subaltern status (Gramsci [1934] 2021, Q25, §4).

Slightly later in his career, Laclau (2005a, 155–56; 2006, 672) employed the term 'heterogeneity' to describe elements that escape the symbolic order, making explicit reference to Bataille. For Bataille ([1933] 1989, 137, 142), the homogeneous refers to what is 'defined and identifiable' or even 'measurable'. This is what appears immediately to social scientists – the structured dynamics of a well-ordered community, along with the primary categories involved in the production and reproduction of society (Bataille [1933] 1989, 140). Heterogeneity, by contrast, refers to what lies beyond measurement and production. It is '*la part maudite*' (the accursed part) – 'incommensurable', 'unassimilable' and 'unproductive' – yet capable of putting production in peril, subverting its ordinary dynamics (Bataille [1949] 1976, 17; [1933] 1989, 142). Using a metabolic metaphor, Bataille ([1930] 1970, 58–59) likens heterogeneity to the waste, the residue, the excrements of society.

Before proceeding, it is worth noting that similar ideas have been explored by other thinkers. Arendt ([1958] 1998, 115, 118, 201; [1971] 1978, 19, 29) – drawing on Heidegger ([1930] 2012, 177) – introduces the concept of the 'worldless' – those aloof subjects excluded from the 'space of appearances', her term for the symbolic order and the political sphere. Judith Butler employs the concept of 'abject' (Butler 1993, 3), describing it as 'what is left outside binaries, what is not even speakable' – that which 'was never supposed to be possible' (Butler 1998, 284–85). Butler (1990, 23; 1993, xi) is concerned with what remains outside the realm of cultural intelligibility.

Subaltern, precarious and the mob

Having understood the role of the 'part of no-part', it is possible to examine the various dynamics involved in invisibilisation. One such dynamic concerns the logics of media ownership. Digital social media, for instance, share elective

affinities with populism, reshaping regimes of visibility (Gerbaudo 2018, 746). Without resorting to techno-determinism, it is important to recognise that digital platforms transgress and alter – though do not eliminate – gatekeeping mechanisms (Santos 2022, 79–80). To some extent, they enable previously marginalised voices to be heard, favour the circulation of more rebellious messaging, foster new forms of social ties, and facilitate novel modes of political organisation. They play a role in what I will further discuss in Chapter 6 as identity-building mechanisms. It is unsurprising, then, that the Yellow Vests regarded these platforms as essential tools for expression and mobilisation.

Another key theme emerges when analysing the underlying mechanisms of invisibilisation: the different ways in which invisibilisation operates. Masses, one might say, are literally heterogeneous. Even within the contemporary French context alone, different sectors are silenced, massified in different ways. The Yellow Vests, for instance, claimed to speak for the 'people' and often presented themselves as a movement open to all, yet this promise remained only partially fulfilled. As I will recall at various points in this book, despite the efforts of some protesters, mobilising racialised citizens of immigrant descent, as well as immigrants themselves in the *banlieues* of major cities, proved difficult (Hayat 2019, 18). This difficulty suggests that, while the movement foregrounded a '*France oubliée*', it failed to encompass many marginalised groups, who remain forgotten, subjected to distinct processes of exclusion.

Some scholars would challenge this line of reflection. Lasse Thomassen (2021, 2), for instance, reaffirmed in an exchange with me that, because they constitute a 'real' at the internal margins of the symbolic, nothing can be said about the heterogeneous before representation. The risk would lie in over-sociologising these categories – as if they had a fixed existence prior to discourse (Thomassen 2005, 113–14). This concern is echoed by Laclau (2005a, 248) and even more explicitly by Rancière (2004, 304–5; 2009, 576), who argues that the 'part of no-part' resists sociological categorisation, since any such attempt imposes labels on those who, by definition, evade naming. These critiques of over-sociologisation are not unfounded, yet they are ultimately mistaken. As Federico Tarragoni (2016, 126–29) has argued, for one to fully grasp social dynamics, the split between political philosophy and sociology must be overcome.

This is why, in recent years, I have sought to develop a typology of invisibilisation, distinguishing between three contemporary forms of silencing – forms that, as I consistently stress, can often overlap and coexist. Analysing these processes through a lens that engages with sociology is not a mistake but a necessary approach to understanding the invisible dimensions of excluded groups.

The racialised groups whom certain Yellow Vests sought to integrate into the movement – but ultimately failed to – may fit within the first category of my typology. This perspective is informed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak ([1985] 1988, 276), whose reflections cannot be de-sociologised. Drawing on Gramsci ([1934] 2021, Q25 §5), she examines subalternity. She defines the subaltern as groups marginalised by gender, race and other markers that render them invisible or reduce their voices to mere noise or threat. At best, these groups form subaltern counter-publics, with shared discourses and identities that struggle to assert themselves in the public sphere (Zicman de Barros 2024, 11; Zicman de Barros and Aiolfi 2025b, 9–10).

Alongside subalterns, another form of invisibilisation must be considered – one that lies at the heart of the Yellow Vests movement. In this case, as in other contemporary examples, invisibilisation is deeply linked to precarisation. Precarisation entails the disorganisation of the working class, largely driven by the erosion of traditional social ties – particularly labour relations – under the pressures of market deregulation and the flexibilisation characteristic of contemporary capitalism. To invoke Marx, this represents a massification of the working class, a phenomenon that extends beyond economic dimensions to encompass profound subjective consequences (Arendt [1958] 1998, 255–57). As Butler (2019, 15, 24–26) notices, precarity – a materially grounded vulnerability that affects specific groups – is distinguished but deeply connected to precariousness – a fundamental, shared vulnerability that traverses all subjects.

The weakening of social safety nets and the transformation of labour relations – marked by the rise of temporary and informal contracts – erode collective bonds, identities and bargaining power. Deprived of symbolic resources necessary for political visibility, the precarious remain excluded from political representation (Zicman de Barros 2024, 11–14).

Beyond the subalterns and the precarious, the next chapter will explore a third, more problematic and controversial expression of worldlessness: the mob, or lumpen. This category is illustrated by certain reactionary sectors within the Yellow Vests, offering a crucial entry point for a broader discussion on populism and radical democracy.

Transgression, enjoyment and fantasy

Colère, a very French affect inadequately translated as anger, was a frequent reference in the Yellow Vests movement (Le Bart 2020, 61). The word popped up everywhere. Éric Drouet's largest support group on Facebook was named *La France en colère*, and demonstrators frequently invoked it. Messages emblazoned on yellow vests read, for example, '*infirmière en colère*' (nurse in

anger), '*enseignant en colère*' (teacher in anger), '*cheminot en colère*' (railwayman in anger), '*aide-soignante en colère*' (caregiver in anger), '*Gaulois en colère*' (Gauls in anger), '*retraités très en colère*' (very angry retirees), and '*qui sème la misère récolte la colère*' (those who sow misery reap anger).

I highlight these references to *colère* because affects constitute a key dimension of the Lacanian 'real', closely linked to transgression and invisibilisation. The link between affects and invisibilisation becomes evident in their frequent rejection. As Emmy Eklundh (2019, 68–69; 2020, 71–74) denounces, many analysts seek to expel affects from the public sphere, treating them as a disruptive and menacing force in politics. This dismissal not only marginalises affective expressions but also serves to delegitimise populist movements, casting them as 'mad', 'unreasonable' or driven purely by passion – thus reinforcing their enigmatic and threatening aura.

The concept of affect itself remains puzzling, often evoking confusion. Discussing it risks falling into what Lacan ([1954] 1998, 92) once mockingly called 'affective smoochy-woochy' (*frotti-frotta*). As the term suggests, affect refers to the capacity to be touched or transformed through an encounter – whether with something external or internal. Not far from the definition of aesthetics, it involves perception and sensitiveness to forces that traverse and propel subjects into motion.

Affects are central to critical fantasy studies because they to help explain the persistence of certain discourses. If discourse is radically contingent and lacks solid foundations, what accounts for its endurance? Why do some discursive constructions appear immutable? What sustains sedimented social practices over time? Conversely, where does populism find its force to mobilise the invisible?

For Laclau (2001, 15; 2004, 302) and other psychoanalytically informed discourse theorists, the answer lies in affect. Rather than being an element to be feared or rejected, affect is the force that sustains discourse. Words mobilise passions, and a discourse remains in place because it is affectively invested (Stavrakakis 2007, 211). Love and hatred, hope and fear, compassion and resentment – these affects underpin the rhetorical power of discourse, shaping its resonance, its grip, its capacity to endure.

Moreover, affects are not external elements that supplement discourse. On this point, discourse theorists may diverge from Christian Le Bart's (2020, 122–23, 127–28) analysis of affects in the Yellow Vests movement. While Le Bart does not argue for excluding affects from politics, he suggests that the movement was driven by a 'brute affect' – what he terms 'brute *colère*' and 'brute force of indignation' – as if affect existed beyond discourse, guiding the movement as an independent force. For critical fantasy studies, affect is

a constitutive part of discourse (Glynos 2021, 5). There can be no meaning without affect.

Affects, however, also have a lot to do with transgression. They encompass experiences connected to what Freud ([1894] 1966, 192) called libido and Lacan (1963, 219–313) would reframe and name *jouissance*, enjoyment. And, here, transgression assumes its central role.

I will further discuss enjoyment from Chapter 4 onwards, but this crucial concept was already present in Bataille's writings. Bataille ([1957] 1987, 18) emphasises that enjoyment emerges precisely there, in transgression. Enjoyment is more than an ordinary pleasure: it is an overwhelming experience that destabilises the subject. Enjoyment relates to that which is beyond asceticism – to the excessive, the sacred, the luxurious, the lustful, the violent, the destructive, the perverse (Bataille [1949] 1976, 21; [1957] 1987, 183). Drawing on Freud, Bataille understands that rigid adherence to ideals may demand an unbearable level of libidinal renunciation (Freud [1921] 1955, 131–32). In this context, the perception of law-breaking can be extremely enjoying (Freud [1921] 1955, 131).

Lacan takes up on Bataille's reflections. He defines enjoyment as an unconscious pleasure that might be experienced as displeasure at the conscious level, as it designates an excess that the psychic system struggles to integrate (Stavrakakis 2007, 78). Furthermore, Lacan ([1962] 2003, 289) also links enjoyment to fantasy, a central concept in psychoanalysis.

As discussed earlier, the subject is inherently vulnerable. Drawing on Freud ([1938] 1964, 271), Lacan ([1970] 1991, 83) says that the subject is marked by a fundamental lack – a split that generates a persistent sense of incompleteness and suffering. Fantasy, as I will explain further in Chapter 4, provides a framework for making sense of this lack. It shapes how subjects interpret their experiences, setting expectations and delineating the limits of what is deemed possible (Glynos 2011, 67). Yet these limits are always defined alongside the prospect of transgressing them, creating the illusion that absolute enjoyment can be attained by breaking norms and prohibitions (Lacan [1960] 2019, 208; [1970] 1991, 19). This promise, however, remains unfulfilled: lack is inherent and insurmountable, making full enjoyment an impossibility.[2]

Enjoyment thus derives from the fantasy of transgression itself – from the idea of violating taboos and overturning interdictions. The prospect of breaking the rules evokes what Freud ([1929] 1961, 65) discusses as 'oceanic

[2] It is no coincidence that fantasy can be treated almost as a synonym for two other categories used by Freud ([1914] 1957, 94–95; [1927] 1961, 1): idealisation and illusion (Birman 1997, 74, 78).

feeling' – an illusory, idealised experience of completeness, of being at one with the world.

Populism derives much of its power from this fantasmatic dimension, its promise of breaking taboos and defying prohibitions. Its appeal lies in its transgressive character, often embodied in leaders who oscillate between the role of stern father and clumsy buffoon – figures who appear to make their own rules, acting as if they can do whatever they want, whenever they want (Safatle 2015, 107).

Critical populism studies have explored this transgressive dimension, particularly in relation to charismatic leadership. Pierre Ostiguy (2009, 1) highlights populism's association with the culturally 'low' in contrast to the 'high', rejecting what is refined and restrained in favour of the coarse and unruly. Benjamin Moffitt (2016, 55) similarly argues that populism thrives on 'bad manners', as populist politicians' buffoonery disrupts political decorum. Aiolfi (2022, 10; 2025, 138–41) further reinforces this view, explicitly linking populist performance to transgression, underscoring how its power stems from the capacity to break norms and conventions – and, I would add, in the enjoyment that such transgression affords.

Yet, beyond leader-centric approaches, the transgressive appeal of populism is also evident in movements like the Yellow Vests. Their defiance of authority, direct confrontations with the police, and even their spectacular displays of violence – which Eugênio Bucci (2016, 28, 55) would consider a form of 'aesthetic enjoyment' – can be seen as instances of revelling in transgression. Ultimately, it is this disruptive force that defines populism, giving it its distinctive and edgy 'charm'.

Populism and aesthetic crisis

I began this chapter by addressing the enigma surrounding populism and the Yellow Vests movement. The theoretical framework developed over the last few pages has, perhaps, shed light on the reasons behind this enigma. More than that, it helps explain another frequent association: the link between populism and crisis.

In studies of populism, this association is almost taken for granted. Populism is often framed as a response to crisis – whether economic, political or social. However, this perspective overlooks a crucial dimension of the relationship between populism and crisis. As Moffitt (2016, 120) argues in his discussion of populism's performative dimension, populism is not merely the result of crises. It actively produces them. Populist leaders understand that the best way to weather the storm is to become the storm. Moffitt's approach emphasises

how populism vocalises and discursively constructs political crises. The Yellow Vests movement exemplifies this dynamic. It was not simply the outcome of years of economic hardship or the erosion of traditional political parties. Rather, it became a catalyst for a political crisis, forcing issues like purchasing power into the heart of public debate.

Yet there is another dimension of crisis that does not contradict Moffitt's account but instead deepens it, making it more coherent. Moffitt's perspective is limited by its focus on what might be called 'ontic' crises. At the same time, populism, by transgressing the boundaries of what can and cannot appear in politics – by speaking on behalf of the 'people' against the 'elites' – reconfigures the very framework through which one 'reads' reality.

The Yellow Vests illustrate this process. For years, this 'forgotten France' remained marginalised, overlooked. Its sudden and forceful irruption not only defied expectations but also compelled political analysts, caught off guard, to reconsider their categories of analysis.

Populism's aesthetic transgression shows that the foundations one thought were solid and used to interpret the world have actually dissolved into thin air. The certainties that once appeared unquestionable vanish, and, at least momentarily, the subject is confronted with a distressing indeterminacy. This is not just an 'ontic' crisis, which one can symbolise and put into words. The aesthetic crisis is existential because it leads the subject to confront the limits of the way they interpret the world and their place in it. The crisis is aesthetic, and therefore ontological. As Butler (2004, 33) says, the entry of the invisible into politics causes 'an insurrection at the level of ontology'. This crisis of indeterminacy – one that resists naming, this 'endless crisis' that marks a world without foundations (Revault d'Allonnes 2012, 53) – is what Laclau (1990, 39) calls *dislocation*. This concept closely aligns with the notion of anguish discussed earlier – the affect that confronts the subject with the groundlessness of reality and identity. As previously indicated, this idea will be explored further in the following chapters.

The relationship between populism and crisis also sheds light on another recurring opposition: the one between populism and institutionalism. Laclau (2005b, 45) himself used to claim that the populist logic would be at the antipodes of the logic of institutionalism. It is no coincidence that Le Bart (2020, 99) has stressed that the Yellow Vests, with their refusal to dialogue with power and even their rejection of formal leadership, were strongly hostile to institutions.

From the idea of politics as a matter of aesthetics, these claims opposing populism and institutions can be reassessed. Drawing on Foucault's (1975, 189) idea that modes of domination themselves can be tacit, invisible,

an aesthetic perspective understands institutions beyond buildings with staff and stamps. Institutions are more than branches of government and codified laws. Institutions are the written and unwritten rules of society, rules establishing what can appear and what cannot appear in politics.

As a transgressive force, populism challenges institutions by exposing these implicit rules, making them visible. By naming these previously unspoken norms, populism alters the limits of the symbolic order – transforming the rules of the game.

Having established populism as a force that exposes and reconfigures institutional norms, one might be tempted to see it as inherently emancipatory. It disrupts institutions, amplifies silenced voices and unsettles the established order. Yet, as the earlier discussion of the mob suggests, the picture is far more complex. Not all transgressions break chains. Some tighten them in new ways. The limits of populism's aesthetic disruption and the fine line between rupture and reaction will be a recurring thread throughout this book. The next chapter delves deeper into this tension.

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2

Were the Yellow Vests radical democratic?

Demands for democracy coursed through the Yellow Vests movement like an unrelenting pulse. The word itself resounded in chants, adorned placards and infused speeches with a sense of urgency. It was frequently invoked in demands for a 'real' democracy – whether through improved representation or mechanisms of direct democracy, notably the RIC – the Citizens' Initiative Referendum. This emphasis on democratic claims is not unique; it is a recurring theme in contemporary protest movements worldwide. Yet the more frequently the term is invoked, the more elusive its meaning becomes. It is a signifier in perpetual dispute, its meaning shifting across contexts. To invoke democracy, then, is to open a question rather than to settle one.

This chapter engages with that very question in assessing the populism of the Yellow Vests. While the previous chapter concluded that the movement was populist, this does not resolve the central question: were the Yellow Vests truly democratic? The relationship between populism and democracy is far from straightforward. Populism, much like democracy, is a term laden with polemics. It has been cast in a pejorative light, often serving as a label for political forces perceived as threatening. In public and academic discourse alike, it is frequently portrayed as the very opposite of democracy, a force that silences opposition and erodes plurality.

Yet history complicates this pejorative view. The meaning of populism has long been subject to contestation, and in certain moments it has been bound up with emancipatory dynamics – particularly when the marginalised have forced their way into the political sphere (Zicman de Barros and Lago 2022, 25–28, 43–54). From this perspective, if populism gives voice to the voiceless – if it embodies the 'real' of democracy – it may carry a democratising potential. But does it?

To address this question, this chapter reconstructs different approaches to populism and its relationship with democracy, engaging specifically with radical democratic theory. Radical democracy fundamentally embraces the radical contingency that defines social life, unsettling entrenched hierarchies and challenging structures of domination. However, its formulations have evolved over time. This chapter traces key moments in this evolution, from conceptualisations of radical democracy through antagonism, to its articulation as the mobilisation of the invisible, before arriving at an understanding of radical democracy as both an ethics and an aesthetics.

Radical democracy as antagonism

Many authors have contended that the Yellow Vests movement has shaken French politics. This surprising and elusive mobilisation appears capable of transforming the given, changing the way a community interprets reality. Michaël Fœssel (2019, 151) views the movement in precisely these terms: for him, the Yellow Vests denaturalised social inequalities that had become mere statistics, and replaced the dominant discourse of efficiency with a renewed call for justice. In the same vein, Rancière (2019, 160–61) and Tarragoni (2019, 355–56) say that the Yellow Vests have transformed the way injustice is interpreted. As discussed in the previous chapter, this was a moment of new beginning – one that reactivated the moment of the political by exposing the radical contingency of social practices.

Radical democracy values such moments and aims to repeat or restage them. To use Arendt's ([1958] 1998, 197) formulation, it seeks to transform the extraordinary into the ordinary. A first key current within democratic theory, known as the dissociative tradition, suggests that these unsettling events, central to what is termed radical democracy, arise through conflict – through social division. In this light, the new beginning performed by the protesters was not merely about reshaping the way one interprets reality. Rather, the moment of the political carries an intrinsic antagonistic dimension. As Samuel Hayat (2019a, 19) notes, the Yellow Vests contested the hegemonic discourse by challenging the status quo and establishing an antagonism with those in power. Ietter (2025, 1–2) makes a similar observation, describing the movement as reinstalling antagonism into French political life. In contesting Macron's hegemonic project, the Yellow Vests revealed that things could be otherwise.

Laclau and Mouffe were key figures in the dissociative tradition, formulating a theory of radical democracy where antagonism plays a central role. For them, antagonism is not an anomaly but a defining feature of the political: democracy cannot be understood as a harmonious order but rather as a

continuous contestation of the dominant discourse. Radical democracy seeks to denaturalise social hierarchies and inequalities. Laclau ([1988] 1990, 180) emphasises the 'revelatory character' of antagonism, making visible the political frontiers structuring society. This is why Laclau and Mouffe first defended populism: it enabled antagonism to emerge.

Laclau and Mouffe align with Lefort's ([1972] 2018, 382) claim that a free community can only emerge from a clash of desires (Zicman de Barros 2024b, 6–10). On one side, there is the desire of the powerful to dominate. On the other, and more importantly, there is the desire of the people not to be dominated. The refusal of domination constitutes this 'people' as an unrepresentable force – one that negates rather than affirms, resists rather than imposes hegemony. As Lefort ([1972] 2018, 476–77) argues, this force does not seek to take power in a conventional sense but aims to keep it in check, preventing its closure. To evoke Lefort's ([1983] 1986, 27, 29) own formulations, it is in this clash that the 'dissolution of the references of certainty' becomes evident, revealing that the place of power is an 'empty place' – contested, unstable and never definitively occupied.

The Yellow Vests could exemplify this logic of emancipatory antagonism. According to Hayat (2019a, 19), the movement positioned itself as the 'below' confronting the 'above', embodied by Macron. Ravelli (2020, §§1–2) goes further, describing the movement as marked by its lack – lack of leadership, lack of organisation – operating primarily as a force of negation and destitution. In this sense, the movement resisted incorporation into the dominant order, instead functioning as an unsettling presence that exposed its fragility.

Antagonism, from this perspective, is not a temporary disorder to be resolved but a latent condition of politics. Laclau ([1983] 1990, 89) famously postulates that 'society is impossible'. By this, he means that social unity is always incomplete, fractured by contradictions, aporias and blind spots that make every order contingent and contestable. Lefort ([1972] 2018, 722–23) arrives at a similar conclusion: for him, conflict is a conflict without resolution. It does not revolve merely around economic interests or political power but stems from the very gap between the symbolic and the 'real', the radical contingency of social practices that ensures the perpetual clash of discourses.

It is precisely for this reason that both Lefort and Laclau and Mouffe oppose any attempt to suppress antagonism in the name of consensus. Lefort ([1974] 1978, 551–55) critiques what he calls 'invisible ideology' – a discourse that presents society as already reconciled, hiding the conflicts that continue to structure it. Laclau (1997, 297–99) similarly denounces ideological attempts to portray society as a seamless totality, arguing not only that the fantasy of a reconciled, dispute-free society is impossible but that, when pursued, it leads to tyranny.

A paradigmatic example of invisible ideology can be found in Macron's post-democratic discourse at the time of the Yellow Vests, mentioned in the previous chapter. By claiming to stand neither left nor right, Macron presented his government as the mere application of rational, technical policies. This supposed consensus sought to neutralise opposition. Those who challenged it were not simply expressing a different vision of society. They were dismissed as wrong, as failing to grasp the technical correctness of his administration's decisions. This logic echoes what Lacan ([1970] 1991, 97–98) criticises in scientific and bureaucratic discourse: it presents itself as the only possible alternative, beyond conflict, erasing political antagonism by framing governance as a matter of neutral management. As Lefort (1979, 11) warns, this domestication of democracy restricts contestation to narrow technical debates, foreclosing deeper political struggles.

Against this domestication of democracy, Laclau and Mouffe advocate a populist strategy that aims to multiply antagonisms. Populism, in their view, is not about simplifying political divisions but about extending democratic struggles across different domains of social life. Mouffe ([1990] 1995, 24) stresses that radical democracy requires not only exposing antagonisms but articulating them into a collective force. Laclau and Mouffe's (2001, xv) main work emerged in the wake of new social movements, which they see as broadening the field of democratic contestation by bringing together struggles over class, gender, race. Yet, without articulation, multiplying antagonisms leaves struggles fragmented and open to co-optation (Laclau 2013, 17–18; Mouffe 2013, 115).

This is where an idea frequently invoked in French political culture becomes central: *convergence des luttes*, or the convergence of struggles. In his earliest militant writings, Laclau (1964, 1) diagnosed a tendency towards the fragmentation of popular struggles in modern societies. As Laurent Jeanpierre (2019, 104, 163–67) notes, many among the Yellow Vests initially joined the movement from a self-contained position, focused on resolving their immediate, personal everyday problems.[1] Laclau's later work, developed alongside

[1] An episode that vividly captures the self-centred dimension of some Yellow Vests protesters – as well as their difficulty in thinking beyond immediate concerns – centres on Ingrid Levavasseur, a thirty-one-year-old care worker from Normandy whom the media cast as an informal leader of the movement. I briefly discuss her in the first appendix of this book. Invited to a national television debate on 28 November 2018, Levavasseur chose not to engage in abstract arguments or broader political claims. Instead, she laid out her household bills before government officials, illustrating her own financial struggles and highlighting that, by the end of the month, she would not be able to afford to pay for her children's extracurricular activities.

Mouffe, insists that these struggles must be linked together into a chain of equivalences (Laclau 1983, 337–38; 2005a, 74), uniting various unsatisfied demands under a common front. By constructing shared political frontiers, this process transforms isolated grievances into a force capable of challenging the existing order. Lefort (1979, 23; [1988] 2008, 275–76) develops a similar argument in his reflections on 'wild democracy' (*démocratie sauvage*), emphasising that insurrectionary moments can only transform the given if they generate an effervescent horizontal solidarity capable of bringing together previously disconnected struggles.

The Yellow Vests illustrated this potential. As Isabelle, a protester, told me, the movement allowed her to realise that 'one's problems are also the other's problems' (*les problèmes des uns sont les problèmes des autres*). Similarly, Priscillia Ludosky explicitly called for a *convergence des luttes*, arguing that the movement should expand its scope and work with trade unions (Le Bart 2020, 96–97). As explained in the previous chapter, some militants also pushed to include the *banlieues* and peripheries. Though limited (Hayat 2019b, 18), these efforts show the need to articulate antagonisms into a broader movement.

The limits of antagonism

The association between antagonism and radical democracy emerged as a point of contention early in Laclau and Mouffe's (1985, 125) work. In their initial theory of antagonism, they argued that antagonism disrupts hegemonic discourses, acting as an expression of the Lacanian 'real' – a moment where the limits of the way one read reality become apparent. However, it soon became evident that the figure of the antagonist might not be as threatening as initially assumed.

A key critic of this idea was Slavoj Žižek, who challenged it by recalling – as discussed in the previous chapter – that identities are relational. Žižek (1990, 251–52) pointed out that, since identities are formed relationally, the antagonist can serve as a reference point that reinforces identity rather than undermining it. Instead of threatening identity, the other may rigidify the boundary between 'us' and 'them'. Rather than existing outside the symbolic order, as an intrusion of the 'real', the antagonist is already a fully integrated symbolic element (Laclau 2001, 15). As Laclau (2007, 20) later observed, in some contexts 'division is perfectly compatible with the status quo'.

This paradox implies that antagonism does not necessarily disrupt hegemonic discourses. On the contrary, it can consolidate them. Antagonism may sustain the illusion of a coherent, self-identical identity. While antagonism can generate existential crises, it simultaneously provides reassuring answers to these

crises. The enemy, rather than being a force of disruption, becomes a constitutive part of discourse, defining identity through negation. This mechanism is frequently exploited by those in power to consolidate their rule. Following Thomassen (2005, 105–8), one could argue that Macron's rhetoric – opposing 'the Republic', 'Republican values', or 'secularism' (*laïcité*) to 'terrorism' – served to bolster his legitimacy. Paradoxically, each new terrorist threat only reinforced the perceived necessity of his leadership.

Žižek further warned that antagonism can sustain the undemocratic fantasy that eliminating the enemy will lead to a fully reconciled, conflict-free society. In the previous chapter, I examined how fantasy serves as a means of coping with the subject's constitutive lack. The other can play a crucial role in this fantasmatic process. Since Freud ([1929] 1961, 67), psychoanalysis has highlighted the tendency to externalise this subjective crisis onto a scapegoat. Lacan ([1948] 1966, 104–5), in turn, links this lack to the emergence of primary aggressivity.

Building on these insights, Žižek (1993, 202) explores a specific form of fantasy – the fantasy of the 'theft of enjoyment' – drawing on an expression from Jacques-Alain Miller ([1986] 2010, 55). This fantasy operates on the belief that, if one is deprived of full enjoyment, it is because another figure is perceived as indulging in an excessive, obscene and immoral enjoyment at one's expense. The fantasy thus suggests that eliminating this figure would restore subjective reconciliation. Targeting the other provides appeasement – and that is why Jean-Paul Sartre ([1946] 1985, 14), reflecting on the mechanics of scapegoating, remarks that, if the outcast did not exist, its enemies would invent it.

This recalls Lefort's warning about ideological projects that seek to eradicate conflict altogether. While technocratic discourse presents an invisible ideology that neutralises political contestation, Lefort ([1974] 1978, 547) identifies another form of ideology – one that openly aims to suppress conflict for good and by force. In moments of deep social anomie, he argues, the risk may not be the domestication of antagonism but, on the contrary, the emergence of an indomitable antagonism. Paradoxically, rather than dissolving the logic of conflict, this indomitable antagonism radicalises it, making the elimination of the enemy appear to be the only path to unity (Lefort [1983] 1986, 29–30).

Radical democracy as heterogeneity

'*Soyons visibles!*' (Let's be visible!) – this was an inscription I saw on the back of a yellow vest on 2 February 2019, during the 11th Act of the Yellow Vests,

also in Paris. I highlight this phrase because it encapsulates a central concept I discussed in the previous chapter – one that lies at the heart of my theory of populism and first emerged in Laclau's work at the turn of the century as a response to the limitations of antagonism: heterogeneity.

The inscription reveals that the movement was not merely about opposing Macron or drawing a line between 'us' and 'them'. Nor was it simply antagonism that made the Yellow Vests so striking. After all, antagonism can just as easily sustain the status quo. What made the movement shocking and unexpected was its ability to incorporate excluded sectors into politics – the voiceless, the invisible – whose very entry into the public sphere constituted an act of transgression. This rupture disrupted established identities, forcing a transformation in the political landscape.

The origins of heterogeneity in Laclau's work have already been outlined, tracing its roots to Hegel's 'peoples without history' and Gramsci's notion of subalternity, before turning to Bataille's concept. Heterogeneity also resonates with Arendt's reflections on worldlessness. What heterogeneity offers to radical democratic thought is an understanding that antagonism alone is insufficient. The transformative potential of the Yellow Vests could not stem solely from their opposition to Macron but rather from their capacity to make the invisible visible. As Rancière (1995, 56; 2005, 66) suggests, it is not antagonism itself but rather an aesthetic transgression – the irruption of the 'part of no-part' – that reconfigures the coordinates through which reality is interpreted, denaturalises relations of subordination and challenges established identities. It is the radical presence of the excluded that constitutes the people as a force of negation and destitution.

Yet does the concept of heterogeneity truly resolve the impasses of antagonism and serve as a foundation for a theory of radical democracy? Can the aesthetic transgression caused by the irruption of the 'part of no-part' serve as a criterion for judging the radically democratic nature of a movement?

At first glance, one might assume that such transgression is inherently emancipatory. After all, the kind of transgression being discussed here – the entry of subalternised groups into politics – appears, by its very nature, liberating. Many theorists have interpreted these processes in this way. Bataille, for instance, was exhilarated by the disruptive force of the heterogeneous. For him, homogeneity was tedious, monotonous and automatic, while true human existence could only be realised through the passionate, tumultuous movement of heterogeneity (Bataille [1939] 1970, 228). Similarly, Butler (1993, 3) celebrates the emergence the 'abject' in politics, as this abjection possesses the capacity to destabilise naturalised hierarchies. Moreover, Butler (2015, 77, 80) notes that, for Arendt, the wordless can transgress the symbolic order and

emerge from invisibility in an emancipatory way. They can actively participate in shaping a space of appearances, invoking what Arendt ([1958] 1998, 199) famously calls 'the right to have rights' – the claim to be recognised as part of the polity. Even Lefort (1999, 53) appears to echo this sentiment, arguing that in moments of 'wild democracy' excluded groups act 'as if they had the law on their side', challenging the existing order by asserting their right to belong. Finally, Rancière (1995, 63–64, 127) contends that politics, in its proper sense, exists only when the 'part of no-part' irrupts into the public sphere, always articulating a claim for equality.

These perspectives suggest that the disruptive force of the heterogeneous is inherently emancipatory. But is it always so?

The limits of heterogeneity

On 20 November 2018, one of the most troubling incidents of the Yellow Vests movement unfolded in Flixecourt, Hauts-de-France. While blocking a road, some protesters discovered six undocumented immigrants concealed inside a lorry and handed them over to the police. This episode starkly illustrated the presence of far-right elements within the movement, as well as the problematic undercurrents that permeated it. Xenophobic demands, including calls for the expulsion of immigrants, circulated from the grassroots level to the movement's summit (Hayat 2019a, 27; Tarragoni 2019, 356–57). This explains why, as mentioned before, the Yellow Vests struggled to mobilise what I have called the subalterns, the sections of the precarious working class in the *banlieues* – predominantly racialised communities. I recall the stark contrast at a local meeting I attended in the north of Paris: inside a bar, mostly white Yellow Vests gathered in discussion, while, outside, the largely non-white residents carried on with their lives, indifferent to the mobilisation in their midst.

These scenes illustrate that, just as the idea of antagonism has its limits in thinking about radical democracy, so too does the idea of heterogeneity have certain shortcomings. Indeed, Freud ([1921] 1955, 113) was deeply pessimistic about the irruption of the masses, seeing them as both fascinating and blinding, pushing subjects 'to the pitch of crime'. Even those theorists who see the emergence of the invisible in the public sphere as a potentially democratic force have been careful to distance themselves from an uncritical celebration of this 'part of no-part'.

As Rancière (2007, 99; 2008, 29; 2021, 102) himself observes, the entry of the 'part of no-part' into politics always carries the risk that its inclusion will result in nothing more than the counting of those who were previously uncounted – an assimilation into the established order rather than a genuine

disruption of it. Like others, he recognises that subalternity and transgression take multiple forms and that there is nothing inherently emancipatory about mobilising the invisible (Thomassen 2005, 301).

This brings the discussion to a distinct contemporary form of invisibilisation. The previous chapter examined how the heterogeneous may manifest in different guises, particularly among subalternised and precarious groups. Yet there is a third expression of the heterogeneous: the mob, or lumpen.

The concept of the mob appears in Arendt's ([1951] 1967, 108; [1952] 2002, 273) work as an expression of the mass, of the worldless. It refers to groups or discourses excluded from both society and political representation, whose entry into the symbolic order does not emancipate anyone but on the contrary suppresses any openness to radical contingency. These discourses often emerge from sectors that feel helpless in a rapidly changing world, gripped by anguishes over the dissolution of traditional certainties – such as those tied to faith, family or national identity. In the contemporary context, these anguishes have been further amplified by increasing precarisation and inequality (see also Fœssel 2012, 20–22). On this terrain, reactionary discourses, previously confined to the shadows, gain traction, emerging in the public sphere in a violent and seemingly transgressive way. Yet their transgression ultimately denies itself, reinforcing rather than challenging existing structures of domination. As Arendt ([1951] 1967, 107, 392) warns, the mob is particularly susceptible to the appeal of a 'strong man' or 'great leader', who transforms their helplessness into resentment and moral panic, directing these affects against an antagonistic other.

The connection between the mob and the lumpen is no accident. In defining the mob, Arendt ([1951] 1967, 107) employs the same expression that Marx ([1852] 1979, 149) uses to describe the lumpen: 'the refuse of all classes'. This formulation is crucial because it underscores that the lumpen are not necessarily the poor. Reactionary forces can emerge from any social stratum, particularly among the *déclassés* – those who experience downward mobility, frustration and resentment (Zicman de Barros 2024a, 14–15).

It is worth noting that even the thinkers who influenced Laclau in his reflections on the 'real' beyond antagonism – Gramsci and Bataille – offer nuanced readings of the political potential of these forces. Remaining within the Marxist tradition, Gramsci is sceptical of spontaneous revolts led by subaltern groups. He sees their diffuse anger as a potential liability, making them susceptible to reactionary leadership and more likely to support right-wing or even tyrannical coups d'état (Gramsci [1930] 1996, Q3 §48).

Bataille ([1933] 1970, 161), in turn, defines fascism as a 'total heterogeneous power' (*pouvoir hétérogène total*). He openly admits to having flirted with

fascism for its mobilising power (Bataille [1958] 1976, 461), and wondered about using the enemy's weapons for a 'real revolution', but he soon recognised their fundamental limitations. Unlike emancipatory transgression, which disrupts established norms to expand political possibilities, reactionary forces operate within a paradox: they revel in transgressing the law while ultimately reaffirming it (Bataille 1947, 521–22). The fascist leader, in this sense, is a heterogeneous figure driving towards homogenisation – reunifying the community by producing new exclusions, new heterogeneities to be repressed (Bataille [1933] 1989, 145–48, 153–54). His is a transgression that does not liberate. It incorporates reactionary sectors but their inclusion only serves to consolidate modes of domination.

Ultimately, therefore, the concept of heterogeneity does not resolve the impasses left by antagonism. The irruption of the Yellow Vests, for example, does not necessarily radicalise democracy simply because they embody the 'part of no-part'. To address this issue and find criteria for this judgement, then, a discussion on ethics and aesthetic judgement is required.

Radical democracy as ethics and aesthetics

In one of the first intellectual analyses of the Yellow Vests movement, written in the early days of the mobilisation, Hayat (2019a, 22–24) defines the movement as being driven by a moral economy. According to Hayat, the Yellow Vests named a wrong – initially an economic one, rooted in growing injustice. Yet this economic wrong was primarily a moral one, violating implicit social pacts about fairness and solidarity. The protesters, in Hayat's account, viewed justice as requiring that the wealthiest contribute their fair share while the most vulnerable receive protection. Their objective was to restore what they perceived as fairer social relations that existed in the past (Hayat 2019a, 27). While this interpretation may not exhaust the complexity of the movement's discourse, I share Hayat's view that moral concerns were central to its mobilisation.

This emphasis on moral grievances raises a broader theoretical question about the role of morality in political mobilisation and its relationship to ethics in radical democracy. Faced with the limitations of the categories of antagonism and heterogeneity, I follow Jason Glynos (2003, 193) and others informed by psychoanalysis in arguing that it is necessary to start thinking of radical democracy as an ethics – and, a step further, as aesthetics, since both are concerned with modes of perception, attunement and affectability. However, this shift requires conceptual clarity, as the distinction between ethics and morality is often blurred. Many tend to conflate ethics with moralism, despite

the crucial differences between them. This confusion, I argue, is also present in Laclau's work, revealing an impasse that must be overcome by reading his arguments critically.

Discussing the ethics of radical democracy in relation to Laclau is challenging, as he was often ambiguous on this issue. The problem he grappled with is common to post-foundational thought. Put simply: if there are no solid grounds upon which to base social practices, if one is confronted with radical contingency, how should one act? Without certainties, what political stance should one adopt?

Many critics have accused Laclau of failing to provide an answer to these questions. According to them, his work suffers from a normative deficit (Howarth 2000, 122–23; Norval 2007, 184). As Critchley (1998, 809) puts it, Laclau's reflections on hegemony offer valuable tools for descriptive analysis but remain silent when it comes to normative questions. Nothing necessarily follows from his theory – no clear course of action can be derived from his post-foundational approach (Arditi [2000] 2007, 28).

These accusations are not without basis. Laclau (1995, 93) himself acknowledges positions close to the relativism he was criticised for, stating that 'it does not follow' from a post-foundational ontology that one must 'cultivate' an awareness of radical contingency, 'or even less to be necessarily committed to a democratic society'. That said, rather than a normative deficit, I believe Laclau's work is marked by an ethical deficit. This is particularly evident in a series of texts published in the early 2000s, where he adopts a controversial stance.

Laclau (2002, 1–5) had a peculiar understanding of ethics and he defines ethical experience as 'the experience of the unconditional'. More precisely, he associates ethics with what he calls 'unconditional commitment'. Laclau (2004b, 178) argues that the ethical emerges from a perceived – and, I would add, idealised – distance between the 'is' and the 'ought'. This gap, he claims, must be bridged through a process that entails an unconditional commitment to a principle. In making this argument, he links unconditional commitment to religion, love and the fascination exerted by the empty signifier, which promises to resolve subjective lack (Laclau 2004b, 180; 2004c, 286–87). I will explore the complexities of the empty signifier in the next chapter, but here it is already clear that Laclau frames it as an idealised symbol embodying the fullness of the community.

His reference to love is revealing, as love has an ambiguous relationship with politics. Lacan himself held shifting positions on love (Fink 2015, 200–201), and Freud ([1921] 1955, 113) associates it with a blinding fascination incompatible with the questioning of certainties.

The issue becomes even more problematic when one considers how, for Laclau, this conception of ethics leads to moralistic relations. Laclau (2000, 83) explicitly associates ethical investment with the construction of an antagonism between good and evil. In other words, in these and other texts, Laclau seems unable to conceive of politics beyond rigid moral binaries. All in all, he seems to confirm the gloomy view of many mainstream scholars who tend to define populism as pitting a 'pure' people against a corrupt elite.

Because of his limited view of ethics as moralism, it becomes harder to defend Laclau against the accusation that, for him, 'anything goes'. Laclau (2004a, 132–33, 135) explicitly states that, from a post-foundational perspective, there is no ethical distinction between emancipatory and reactionary projects. For him, all political projects involve an idealised, unconditional attachment to a moral injunction. He does not consider the possibility of moving beyond moralism or, at the very least, altering one's relation to it. His framework offers no way to conceive of an 'ethics of radical democracy' as such. If ethics is defined as absolute moral commitment, then radical democracy – which must reject such rigidity – would be an oxymoron. As Aletta Norval (2007, 15) observes, following Laclau's reasoning leaves one 'unable to appreciate the specificity of [radical] democratic identification'.

However, this is not the full picture. Laclau's work is marked by ambiguity, but this very ambiguity allows for more promising openings. His partner, Mouffe (2013, 116), for instance, criticises protest movements for reinforcing a dichotomy between good and evil that easily leads to a naïve 'moralistic condemnation of the rich'. For her, moralism is simplistic, ineffective and, more importantly, idealised – it fosters the illusion of a reconciled society purged of evil.

Similarly, Laclau recognises that radical democracy requires a different approach. As I will discuss in the following chapters, despite the issues noted above, Laclau (2005a, 246–247; 2005b, 259–60) has, at various points, distinguished between radical democratic and undemocratic populisms, arguing that populism can only be radically democratic if it integrates a liberal and plural dimension. This position implicitly suggests an ethical openness to the other and an awareness that, beyond the moralistic fantasies of a fully reconciled society, 'the only [radical] democratic society is one which permanently shows the contingency of its own foundations' (Laclau 2000, 85).

On dislocation

Throughout this book, I argue that, despite Laclau's ambiguities, his work offers valuable insights into radical democracy, particularly its ethical dimensions.

Central to this potential is psychoanalysis, which provides a deeper understanding of the subject and its relationship with identity. While this perspective sometimes requires reading Laclau against the grain, his engagement with psychoanalytic ideas reveals an ethical surplus that complements discourse theory. In this light, psychoanalysis becomes a means to rethink radical democracy beyond the confines of antagonism and heterogeneity.

Subjectivity became a focal point in debates around what I call Laclau's 'ethical deficit', with some of his responses offering a pathway to an ethics of radical democracy. At stake was whether his account of subjectivity implied a sovereign, self-grounding agent. Richard Rorty (1996, 71–72), for instance, accuses Laclau of 'decisionism': if radical contingency makes every decision intrinsically 'mad', then what prevents such decisions from justifying undemocratic projects under the guise of sovereign will? David Howarth (2000, 121–22; 2004, 264) pushes this concern further, noting that Laclau at times seemed to flirt with the idea of 'an unconditional subjectivity that is literally able to "create" meaningful structures', dependent solely on 'who is in command' (Laclau 1990, 29).

Laclau rejects such criticisms in a number of ways. First, he consistently rejects the idea that meaning could be constructed arbitrarily, out of the blue (Laclau 2000, 82; 2004a, 125). His theory always emphasises that discourse operates within a context. While the symbolic order is fragile and full of aporias, and therefore always open to challenge, any decision can only take place within its parameters (Howarth 2013, 161–64).

Second, and more crucial for this discussion, Laclau draws on psychoanalysis to reject the notion of a sovereign, unified subject. He cautions against what he called the 'essentialism of a sovereign chooser' (Laclau [1988] 1990, 193). Instead, he argues that the subject is inherently split, shaped by the constitutive lack I previously mentioned (Howarth 2013, 14). This perspective allows him to engage with a deeper critique of identity, one that is central to psychoanalytic ethics.

Laclau ([1986] 1990, 96; 1990, 39) integrates this critique into his concept of dislocation, a major appropriation of Lacan's thought. Dislocation names this constitutive lack destabilising both the symbolic order and the subject. The concept, which preceded his focus on heterogeneity, emerged in response to criticisms from Žižek, who argued that Laclau's notion of antagonism failed to account for existential, internal crises. Drawing on the psychoanalytic insight that the antagonist often serves as a scapegoat 'thief of enjoyment' for projecting internal conflicts, Laclau (1999, 96) introduces dislocation to describe a more fundamental existential crisis – one that is not resolved through confrontation with an external enemy. In my view, dislocation corresponds to the

experience of helplessness, discontent, uncanniness, *malaise* or, as Lacan puts it, anguish – an affect that identity construction seeks to suppress.

Although dislocation was central to Laclau's work in the 1990s, Arditi (2010, 491) notes its absence in his later writings on populism, where it 'is not even worthy of an entry in the index'. This omission is regrettable, as the concept is profoundly informed by psychoanalysis and carries significant ethical implications. Dislocation reveals that no discourse can achieve permanent hegemony because of the unbridgeable gap between the symbolic and the 'real'. Moreover, there is also an unbridgeable gap between the external image of the self and an internal self. The subject's identity is inherently unstable, shaped by relational dynamics and haunted by internal heterogeneity. There will always be something haunting, annoying the subject from the inside. Something that does not fit. Something that is *extime* – Lacan's ([1969] 2006, 224, 249) term for an internal element that is experienced as foreign, uncanny.

Understanding dislocation helps frame an ethics of psychoanalysis and radical democracy as an awareness of radical contingency – not only in the world but also within the subject, including collective identities. As Critchley ([1992] 2014, 239) puts it, radical democratic communities are those 'which have themselves in question'. In this sense, identity is not a fixed essence but a process of identification, perpetually undone by dislocation (Laclau 1990, 44). Psychoanalysis encourages the acceptance of this impossibility of identity, positioning the critique of identity as an ethical moment.

If dislocation means anguish, then the ethics of radical democracy embraces this affect. But why would anyone want to experience anguish? Helplessness, discontent and uncanniness are states most people would understandably seek to avoid. For Lefort ([1983] 1986, 30), for instance, excessive indeterminacy was often the root of calls for authoritarian figures who promise to restore order and certainty, and this longing for stability is easy to understand. Even Laclau (1996, 49) acknowledges that 'dislocation is not *ipso facto* something positive and worthy of celebration'. Anguish can be dangerous.

However, there are reasons to welcome anguish. Lacan ([1963] 2004, 92) famously claims that anguish is the only affect that does not deceive, as it exposes radical contingency and serves as a reminder that things could be otherwise. Attempts to suppress anguish, on the other hand, often result in psychic suffering, as the demand for certainty and control creates unbearable ideals and fantasies. Rather than fleeing anguish, confronting it makes it possible to recognise and accept the fragility of identities and social systems.

Finally, it is crucial to distinguish between different forms of anguish. Not all anguish is paralysing. Miller (2004, §9) distinguishes between 'constituted

anguish', which immobilises the subject, and 'constituent anguish', which creates the conditions for change. Constituent anguish represents a willingness to confront uncertainty and welcome new beginnings. By engaging with anguish in this way, one comes closer to the ethical promise of radical democracy: a commitment to openness, transformation and the ongoing questioning of certainties.

Identity to come

Jacques Derrida (1994, 128), with whom Laclau discussed issues related to ethics, diverges from him by understanding that post-foundationalism carries ethical consequences. Derrida (1988, 152) also speaks of an unconditional commitment, but his interpretation of it differs significantly from Laclau's. Rather than advocating for an unconditional commitment of a moralistic kind, Derrida's commitment is to indeterminacy.

It is through this acceptance that Derrida (1990, 53) develops the idea of a 'democracy to come' (*démocratie à venir*). For Derrida, the democracy to come is not a project. It is not a clearly defined ideal to be achieved in the future. It is a promise – but a very particular kind of promise. A promise whose content remains open and indeterminate. It entails moving towards an unknown, unanticipated future, embracing uncertainty. As Marchart (2002, 253) might put it, one is dealing here with a democracy that is not merely unrealised but is unrealisable, and is accepted as such. This promise of democracy becomes a call to engagement, an invitation to perpetual immanent critique, enabling the criticism of democracy's own limitations in the name of democracy itself.

This brief *détour* through Derrida is essential because Norval draws on the idea of democracy to come to explore how identity critique operates. These processes shape different relationships with the symbols that constitute identity – whether personal or collective. While Norval (1996, 165) acknowledges that subjects will ultimately seek an identity, she argues that this identity can be symbolised in a radically democratic way.

As Norval (1996, 158) asserts, a radical democratic ethics entails both having and criticising one's own identity. Clearly drawing inspiration from Derrida's *démocratie à venir*, she even coined the concept of an *identité à venir* – an identity to come. This identity could emerge from a discourse open to 'the possibility of coming to terms with the contingency and fluidity of forms of identification, of taking the non-closure of identity seriously' (Norval 1996, 165). Norval explores an open identity, marked by a willingness to transform over time and by fragility and instability. Identity here operates as a special kind of promise – not a promise of complete identity but rather a

reference point, a signifier whose substance remains open to change (Revault d'Allonnes 2016, 50).

This openness to contingency reflects a rejection of closure and conformism, which Norval (2007, 175) later described as an 'aversive identity'. Such an identity requires constantly questioning one's own identity and recognising its inadequacies. Resonating with Rancière (2011, 13), Norval's aversive identity aligns with the claim that an emancipatory project must invent the people before inventing its future. This approach underscores the porous and radically contingent character of identities, which remain open to transformation (Norval 2007, 167, 185).

Aesthetic judgement

The concept of an identity to come or an aversive identity reveals that psychoanalysis is not only a tool for thinking about an ethics of radical democracy but also closely connects to aesthetics. An ethics of radical democracy, as becomes clear, is deeply intertwined with aesthetic experiences. Much depends on whether subjects approach their identity – and the symbols that shape it – critically. The etymology of aesthetics – understood as the capacity to perceive and be affected – aligns with the ethical perspective adopted here: a way of seeing and interpreting reality. It is no coincidence that Lacan ([1960] 2019, 266) addresses the ethics of psychoanalysis in the same seminar where he explored aesthetics most extensively. Thus, an ethics of radical democracy inherently involves a way of being affected and of navigating the symbolic order – in other words, it implies an aesthetics of radical democracy.

At this point, viewing populism as an aesthetic transgression offers an important analytical advantage. It situates populist outbursts within the realm of aesthetic judgement, providing a lens to assess their radical democratic potential (Zicman de Barros and Aiolfi 2025a, 10–14). For instance, evaluating the democratic nature of the Yellow Vests requires understanding their relationship with identity and the symbols around which that identity was constructed.

Rancière's work highlights the connection between aesthetic and political judgement but it was Arendt (1961, 222) who laid the foundation for extending aesthetic judgement into the political realm. For Arendt ([1970] 1989, 70–74), such judgements are not mere expressions of personal taste – for example, someone who likes an extravagantly colourful vest – but are grounded in a 'community sense'. This should not be confused with 'common sense': for Arendt, it does not mean received opinion or everyday clichés but a shared capacity to take the perspectives of others into account – something closer to an 'uncommon sense' that reflects an awareness of plurality, the fact that

people are different and interpret the world in different ways. While Arendt's contributions to aesthetic criticism were fragmentary, they provide valuable insights into how judgement operates within political contexts.

How, then, can one judge whether the transgressive aesthetics of a populist experience is radically democratic? Here, the concept of transgression serves as a compass. Radical democratic aesthetics are defined by fidelity to transgression – the commitment to troubling the categories through which reality is interpreted. One is dealing with symbols that expose the aporias of discourses, highlights what does not fit, and challenges the borders of identity, often in the name of inclusion and equality. Symbols that create openings for marginalised and subalternised subjects to enter the public sphere.

Radical democratic transgressive aesthetics embrace the uncanny and unsettling, disrupting familiar norms and fostering openness to plurality. They relate to aesthetic experiences that can be called eccentric – in the sense that they decentre the subject, questioning and challenging their identity. By creating tension between the familiar and the strange, these aesthetics disrupt hierarchies and reshape symbolic boundaries, expanding the scope of inclusion. This perspective celebrates the 'grotesque', the 'formless' and the heterogeneous as forces that resist closure, provoke self-reflection and generate new possibilities for political community.

Marchart's (2019, 23) concept of 'conflictual aesthetics' provides a valuable framework for understanding the role of transgression in radical democratic populism. He has recently introduced this umbrella term to describe two aesthetic dimensions in protest movements. The first, an 'aesthetics of conflict', involves antagonistic practices that draw clear distinctions between 'us' and 'them'. The second, a 'conflicting aesthetics', encompasses practices that disrupt and destabilise these very boundaries. While Marchart merges the two dimensions, I align radical democratic aesthetics specifically with 'conflicting aesthetics' – practices that refuse to 'fit' within the existing symbolic order. These practices not only challenge established norms but also invite an openness to such disruptions, continually questioning who belongs in the political community (Zicman de Barros 2022, 81).[2]

This 'conflicting aesthetics' gives rise to a paradoxical counter-hegemonic hegemony – a form of hegemony that undermines its own foundations, resisting consolidation into a fixed order. Radical democratic populism cultivates

[2] For a debate on the relationship between this aesthetic judgement of emancipatory populist transgressions and queer theory, see my article with Théo Aiolfi (Zicman de Barros and Aiolfi 2025a, 10–14). The connection between emancipatory transgressions and subaltern studies is further developed in Zicman de Barros and Aiolfi (2025b, 12–15).

symbols that remain open to plurality, continuously reshaping the boundaries of the political community. This fosters an ongoing process of contesting established norms and creating new spaces for inclusion, while resisting the pull of closure and certainty.

Having outlined how this troubling aesthetics reshapes political community, the next step is to consider, through the lens of aesthetic judgement, the case of the Yellow Vests: how do they engage with their symbols, and to what extent do these symbols disrupt identity, provoke anguish and create openings for new forms of political subjectivation? To explore this, I will turn to the concept of empty signifier – arguably the cornerstone of ethical and aesthetic relations in critical populism studies.

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3

The yellow vest as an empty signifier

It was 2008 when the French government approved a minor new rule for driving safety: every driver was required to keep a high-visibility yellow vest in their vehicle, ready to be worn in case of emergency. A measure of pure safety, it seemed. The vest – cheap, fluorescent and utterly unremarkable – was meant only to glare in the headlights of passing cars, a warning to keep danger at bay should the driver, for whatever reason, have to step outside onto the roadside. And, for ten years, that was all it was.

The story could have ended there. Despite some criticism at the time from those who did not want to spend a few euros on an aesthetically controversial vest, the policy was adopted and life went on as usual. A yellow vest is an ordinary everyday object, with no inherent vocation of becoming a symbol of protest. No one could have predicted that this humble piece of fabric, tossed into glove compartments or forgotten under car seats, would one day ignite a political storm. It took a decade for the vest to be transformed, stripped of its original function and reborn as a symbol of outrage. When Ghislain Coutard, a technician, proposed it as an emblem for the growing online revolt ahead of the *journée de colère* against the carbon tax, it became more than a garment. It became a banner – a rallying point around which hundreds of thousands of citizens gathered.

At the end of the previous chapter, I argued that radical democracy involves a particular ethical and aesthetic experience. This is why I turn to the yellow vest here. This chapter explores the power of aesthetic symbols – particularly the yellow high-visibility vest – and their role in shaping the Yellow Vests movement. It seeks to understand how these symbols not only brought together disparate actors but also forged a sense of collective identity

among them. In doing so, it raises critical questions about the radical democratic character – or lack thereof – of this bond.

To examine these dynamics, I turn to a key concept for understanding political identities in general and populism in particular – perhaps Laclau's most famous and influential, yet also most puzzling, idea (Freeden 2021, 56): the concept of empty signifier. The strength of this concept does not lie in a precise definition but rather in its very elusiveness and polysemy. These various facets of the notion of empty signifier are crucial to understanding how certain symbols – like the yellow vest – can become the focal point of a movement, how antagonisms take shape, how disparate demands converge and how this assemblage of grievances can remain profoundly incoherent. More than that, it opens the way for exploring how, within this layered cacophony, both emancipatory and reactionary identities can coexist in the same movement.

Point de capiton and master signifiers

The transformation of the yellow vest into a political symbol suggests that meaning is never inherent to a signifier but emerges through contingent articulations. Yet, if meaning is fluid and constructed, what prevents signifiers from remaining in perpetual instability? How do certain symbols acquire enough consistency to structure political identification? In Chapter 1, I examined how affects sustain and give force to discourse – an idea closely linked to psychoanalytic thought. The concept of empty signifier pushes this reflection further. Beyond explaining the strength of a discourse, it accounts for its internal coherence. Here, once again, psychoanalysis plays a key role.

Laclau introduced the concept of empty signifier in 1996, drawing significantly from psychoanalysis. As Laclau (2005a, 217) himself suggests, this notion is inspired by Lacan's concept of the master signifier. However, its psychoanalytic foundations run deeper. Thirteen years earlier, Laclau ([1983] 1990, 91) had already referenced Lacan's similar notion of *point de capiton* to develop his own concept of the nodal point – defined as a discursive element that can 'partially fix meaning', providing stability to discursive constructions (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 113). The proliferation of related terms has led to interpretative confusion. Are these concepts synonymous, as some have suggested (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, xi; Howarth 2004, 268)? And what role does psychoanalysis play in understanding them? Before addressing these questions, it is necessary to examine the psychoanalytic origins of Laclau's conceptual framework.

The notion of *point de capiton* – translated as 'quilting point' or 'anchoring point' – was the first in this series, emerging in Lacan's early seminars on psychosis. The term serves as a metaphor, likening the role of a signifier to the

upholstery button that stabilises a couch's structure. Lacan, concerned with psychotic cases, sought to understand what distinguished psychosis from other psychic structures. He concluded that the *point de capiton*, the element that would stabilise the subject's psychic system, was absent in psychotic discourse. The *point de capiton* is a signifier that occupies a central role in the symbolic order, anchoring the chain of signifiers and preventing them from floating freely. Lacan described it as the point 'from which everything irradiates and is organised' (Lacan [1956] 2018, 422). Without it, other signifiers would remain floating, and signification could not stabilise (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 113).

Lacan ([1970] 1991, 181) later introduced the master signifier as an alternative metaphor. Like the *point de capiton*, the master signifier retrospectively grants coherence to a chain of signifiers, ensuring the 'readability' of discourse. Bruce Fink (1995, 75) describes the master signifier as a 'nonsensical signifier' because it disrupts the linguistic rule that meaning arises relationally. Instead, it anchors meaning by pointing to itself and halting the free-floating nature of signifiers (Lacan [1970] 1991, 84). It functions as the ultimate reference, a source of 'full' meaning that cannot be fully articulated. In political terms, the master signifier establishes its own legitimacy. It lies at the core of any ideology (Freeden 1994, 157), and, to retake Lefort's ([1983] 1986, 29) expression, reinstates 'references of certainty', serving as the foundation from which all else is deduced (Lefort 2002, 452). It constitutes a 'point of certainty where the need for discussion is cancelled', imbued with tautological authority (Lefort [1974] 1978, 527).

Yet the master signifier is not purely symbolic. Its role cannot be separated from fantasy and enjoyment – a topic that I will explore even further in the next chapter. Lacan makes it clear that the subject is defined by a constitutive lack, an incompleteness that fuels a perpetual quest for full enjoyment. The master signifier plays a crucial role in this dynamic. It appears as the idealised, forbidden or unattainable object of fantasy (Stavrakakis 2007, 204). One believes that reclaiming political agency through direct democracy, abolishing unjust economic burdens or finally holding the elites accountable might restore a sense of wholeness, resolution, ecstasy.

Setting aside further psychoanalytic digressions, what matters here is the way the master signifier functions as an idealised object, exerting a fascination as if it could resolve the fundamental lack that marks the subject. This is what gives it its strength. Psychoanalysis, in its critical function, seeks to dismantle these illusions. The great challenge of psychoanalytic practice lies in exposing the emptiness behind these enchanted signifiers. For sure, direct democracy or economic justice can be entirely legitimate and justified goals. The issue, however, is the affective investment in them – the way they become unconscious

promises of ultimate closure (Žižek 2006, 304). Psychoanalysis reveals that a world of absolute certainty and untroubled enjoyment does not exist – that the symbolic order sustains itself through master signifiers that, ultimately, lack consistency.

The polysemy of an empty signifier

From the previous discussion, one might assume that the empty signifier is simply Laclau's term for Lacan's master signifier or *point de capiton*. However, this is not the case, as the empty signifier is not even synonymous with itself. Since its introduction, Laclau and his followers have applied the concept across a range of contexts, assigning it multiple meanings, forms and referents. These diverse applications often coexist without distinction, yet the polysemy is so pronounced that it becomes difficult to argue they represent different facets of a unified concept that can be coherently reconciled.

In the following pages, the empty signifier will be critically examined through five distinct interpretations:

1. As a symbol of the pure being of the symbolic system;
2. As a particular demand that comes to represent all other political struggles;
3. As a 'negative' symbol that names an antagonistic other;
4. As a symbol whose content is problematically poor;
5. As a symbol pointing to a non-saturated symbolic space – an open identity.

First use of the term: a symbol of the pure being of the symbolic system

The Yellow Vests movement did not emerge with a single, pre-established symbol. Protesters identified as the 'people' or 'citizens' and expressed a collective *colère*, encapsulating grievances that spanned both economic and political demands. They also reappropriated French revolutionary symbols – most notably the tricolour flag, 'La Marseillaise' and the motto *Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité* – to frame their struggle within a national and historical heritage. Furthermore, occupations of roundabouts and weekly Saturday marches became powerful markers of the movement's presence in public space (Butler 2015, 8, 25–26, 156–57). Yet, among these various references, one ultimately provided the strongest unifying force: the high-visibility vest. A mundane object, it was resignified at a moment of reactivation (Laclau 1990, 33–34), becoming the movement's most recognisable emblem and a reference for mutual recognition among protesters (Gerbaudo 2021, 280). More than a sign of protest, it gave form to discontent, defined identities and determined how grievances were

articulated and understood. In this sense, the yellow vest functions as a symbol that actively shapes discourse – it structures the way protesters perceive the world.

Shaping perception in this way is precisely the function Laclau attributes to the empty signifier when he first introduces the term. In its initial formulation, the empty signifier appears as a fundamental feature of all symbolic systems. For Laclau (1996a, 39), it is the only mechanism that prevents a system of meaning from collapsing. As he would continue to argue throughout his life, every symbolic system must establish limits – without them, coherence would be impossible (Laclau 2005a, 69–71).

Given that meaning operates differentially – where a signifier acquires significance only through its relation to others – the system's limits, essential for its coherence, must themselves be marked by another difference, yet one that is qualitatively distinct. This is where the empty signifier comes into play. It represents what Laclau calls 'the pure being of the system' against its antagonistic limits, which embody pure negativity – the Lacanian 'real', as he says (Laclau 1996a, 39). These limits are antagonistic in the sense defined in his earlier work with Mouffe (1985, 125): what lies beyond them does not merely exist outside the system but actively threatens its consistency and identity (Laclau 1996a, 38).

At this stage, Laclau introduces a crucial concept that remains central to his theory of the empty signifier: equivalence. Although signifiers within the system maintain their distinctiveness through differential relations, when confronted with what lies beyond its boundaries they come to be seen as equivalent. They share a common feature – the fact that they belong to the same enclosed symbolic system, unified against an external threat. In this sense, Laclau takes a further step, arguing that the empty signifier is what gives 'us' a name. It seeks to forge a shared identity – even if it never fully succeeds, for every symbolic construction remains radically contingent.

Second use of the term: a particular demand that comes to represent all other political struggles

The Yellow Vests movement began with a specific demand, voiced in Ludosky's petition: the government must revoke the new carbon tax. However, it quickly became evident that the movement was about more than just fuel prices or even broader concerns over purchasing power and fiscal justice. The opposition to the carbon tax became a focal point for widespread discontent – a '*ras-le-bol*' (being fed up) – that served as a rallying symbol around which diverse grievances started to coalesce in a *convergence des luttes*.

The movement saw a proliferation of demands. At the local level, in a revival of an old tradition dating back to the early days of the French Revolution, numerous *cahiers de doléances* – lists of grievances – were compiled. Nationally, on 25 November 2018, Drouet and Ludosky convened a self-proclaimed 'national coordination' meeting, bringing together thirty prominent figures of the movement. I discuss this meeting further in the first appendix. From this gathering emerged a short-lived eight-person delegation tasked with presenting the movement's demands. By that point, the initial focus on fuel prices had expanded into an eclectic and sometimes contradictory set of revendications, structured into seven thematic categories. These ranged from lowering employers' taxes and raising the minimum wage and pensions to recognising blank votes, restricting welfare benefits, universalising access to culture and banning glyphosate.

While the carbon tax had initially provided a unifying symbol, within a few weeks another demand soon took centre stage. To some extent, it even overshadowed the original claim. This was the call for greater democracy, particularly through the implementation of the Citizens' Initiative Referendum, the RIC. As Isabelle, a demonstrator I introduced in Chapter 2, told me in Jaunet:

> If we succeed in putting the RIC in place, we will be able to answer to all the other problems. Today, we have thirty demands: purchasing power, better public services, and so on and so forth. Thirty demands. Now, let's say that the government concedes and gives us the RIC … The RIC will give us the means to pressure, the means to say all that it is going to happen, whether in six months or in ten years.

The shift towards the RIC as the primary demand can be traced with some precision. On 6 December 2018, it became a trending topic in the movement's digital social media discussions. The following day, Ludosky incorporated it into an update of her petition and launched a poll to assess whether it should be among the movement's core demands.[1] By 8 December, the RIC had become a prominent slogan in one of the movement's largest demonstrations.

This discussion ties into Laclau's second use of the empty signifier, which places demands at its core. A few pages after introducing the idea of

[1] Curiously enough, in the 'updates' to her online petition, Ludosky said that if most responses to her poll were in favour of the idea of a RIC, the proposition itself should be subjected to a national referendum – together with other ideas such as the creation of a Citizen's Assembly composed through a lottery system, a tax reduction for food, electricity, gas, water and fuel, and the reduction of wages for members of government.

equivalence, which was central to his initial formulation, Laclau shifts towards its political application. He presents this as a logical extension of his earlier argument, though one that could also be considered separately. In this practical sense, the empty signifier serves as a rallying point for political struggles (Laclau 1996b, 39). It does not simply name 'us' but embodies the struggle that represents 'our' struggles. A particular demand comes to stand in for a broader set of demands (Laclau 1997, 18).

Owing to its more concrete applications, this is perhaps the most common use of the concept in the literature. Laclau further developed and formalised it in his debate with Žižek and Butler, where he introduced his well-known diagram. To illustrate this with the present case study, multiple demands – D_1, D_2, D_3, D_4, representing the previously discussed grievances of the Yellow Vests – are articulated around a particular demand, D_1, most likely 'For a Citizens' Initiative Referendum'. This demand functioned as an empty signifier, uniting disparate struggles against a common antagonist – Macron.

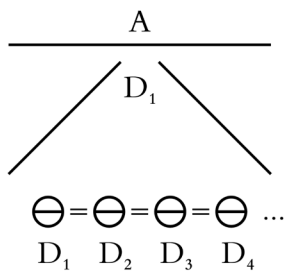

Figure 3.1 The dynamic of articulation.

Source: Laclau 2000a, 303, adapted.

As Laclau explains when introducing this graph, what links these different demands is not a shared positive content. There is no intrinsic common denominator that determines why distinct struggles come to be perceived as equivalent. Rather, equivalence is grounded in their shared condition of remaining unfulfilled. This is why Laclau represents demands using two semicircles (Laclau 2005a, 130–31; 2005b, 37–38). The lower half symbolises the particular content of each demand, which does not vanish in the process of articulation, while the upper half represents the shared lack that enables their equivalential connection in the first place.

Laclau further clarifies this point by noting that the signifier D_1 is only *tendentially empty* (Laclau 2000a, 304; 2005a, 96). In other words, a signifier is never absolutely empty but only empty to a certain degree. Emptiness here refers to the extent to which a signifier loses its original, particular meaning

as it becomes 'the rallying point of equivalential associations vaster than itself' (Laclau 2005a, 217). The broader the chain of equivalences, the emptier the nodal signifier must become to represent the totality of demands.

This second use of the concept raises at least three problems. The first stems precisely from its apparent concreteness, which, compared to the first use, makes it more restrictive. The antagonistic relation between the system and its constitutive outside is now reformulated as a political struggle between the people and its enemies. Moreover, Laclau shifts from describing a formal relation between signifiers to a political relation between demands. This raises an unresolved question: what is the precise relationship between signifiers and demands? At first glance, a demand seems to presuppose a particular configuration of signifiers. A possible way forward would be to revisit Lacan's (1966, 813) notion of demand. As Fink (1999, 60) explains, for Lacan 'all speech is demand'. In other words, a demand does not need to be explicitly articulated – such as 'Power to the People' or 'For a Citizens Initiative Referendum' – to function as such. The word 'people' or a yellow vest alone could play this role.

The other two issues present greater challenges. The second, which I have termed the essentialism of demands (Zicman de Barros 2020, 511), will be examined in the next chapter. The third concerns an apparent contradiction between this political translation of the empty signifier and its earlier theoretical formulation. Laclau argues that, in practical terms, the emptier a signifier becomes, the more effectively it can represent a wider range of struggles. This part is relatively easy to understand. However, it is difficult to reconcile with the more abstract claim that every symbolic system requires clear boundaries to maintain coherence and must rely on an empty signifier to establish them. If this premise holds, then the idea of varying degrees of emptiness becomes problematic. If a system depends on an empty signifier for its internal consistency, a less empty signifier would imply weaker systematicity – psychosis, *in extremis*. This could lead to the mistaken conclusion that only explicitly populist situations, where a sharp antagonism is in place, allow for the representation of the pure being of the system and, consequently, for the fixation of meaning.

Third use of the term: a 'negative' symbol that names an antagonistic other

In the previous chapters, I discussed how the epithet 'populist' served the detractors of the Yellow Vests to attack a movement that frightened them and which they could not decipher (Tarragoni 2019, 136). Paradoxically, naming this other also provided a certain comfort, guaranteeing a position of moral superiority to the defenders of order. This dynamic, where labelling serves to stabilise the identity of the accusers, is mirrored in the movement's own

processes of identity formation. The Yellow Vests, in turn, engaged in their own acts of naming and opposing, constructing a shared adversary that was central to their cohesion and mobilisation.

The movement was not only defined by the symbols naming it or by the demands it put forward. A central element in its constitution was the construction of an antagonist, of a common adversary. This 'other' could refer to the government, the Parisian elites, traditional politicians and the mainstream media (Le Bart 2020, 155–56), but it was ultimately synthesised in the figure of Macron. If the French presidency is suited for charismatic leaders to perform the role of an extraordinary man, Macron reinforced this tendency. Having been elected without a traditional political party and in opposition to the established political order, Macron's figure became the anchor of his government. His confrontational political style further contributed to his becoming the primary target of the protesters. On one occasion, confronted by a protester over fuel prices, he replied dismissively, '*Le carburant, c'est pas bibi*' (The fuel, it's not muggins here), an incident that made him seem arrogant, disrespectful and disconnected from the people in the eyes of the Yellow Vests (Le Bart 2020, 146; Monod 2019, 24).

The antagonistic relationship embodied by Macron illustrates the broader dynamics theorised by Laclau. In his very first discussion of empty signifiers, Laclau (1996a, 39) posits the existence of two distinct empty signifiers in every discourse: one representing its internal coherence and the other representing its limits (Stavrakakis 1999, 80–81). While the first consolidates identity within a movement, the second symbolises opposition to an external threat, anchoring collective discontent and identity formation.

The 'negative' empty signifier plays a paradoxical role. On the one hand, it embodies a fundamental threat to the symbolic order. On the other, it provides stability to identity by externalising existential anguishes. As discussed in the previous chapter, the construction of an 'other' is central to fantasies of 'thieves of enjoyment'. This process has tangible social effects, as this scapegoating process becomes a powerful tool of unification. As Freud ([1921] 1955, 100; [1929] 1961, 114) observes, one of the most effective ways to bind a diverse group together is to provide it with a shared adversary. The negative empty signifier thus aggregates discontent, enabling disparate groups to articulate their grievances through a common antagonist.

In this sense, the 'negative' empty signifier also implies equivalences of a different kind As early as 1980, Laclau had already outlined a situation in which 'every characteristic of the aggressor … is presented in a relation of equivalence with other characteristics', which are 'stripped of its 'literal' meaning and come to signify negativity' (Laclau 1980, 90). This emptiness allows the antagonist

to absorb a range of pejorative – and often contradictory – attributes, making it a malleable enemy adaptable to different grievances. As Žižek (1999, 178) argues, each group projects its specific grievances onto the antagonistic other, creating a unifying but multifaceted target of opposition.

Fourth use of the term: a symbol whose content is problematically poor

What does it mean to wear a yellow vest? At first glance, given that this object had no apparent vocation to become a political symbol, it may seem difficult to grasp the movement's content through it. A yellow vest can represent anything. Yet the absence of an immediate answer to this question may have been seen by some as an advantage. The vest had distinct qualities as a protest symbol. It was widely accessible – costing only a few euros and mandated in every car – while also allowing for personal appropriation. Many demonstrators customised their vests, turning them into spaces of political expression. Some inscribed specific demands. Others scrawled slogans against Macron. Some transformed them into testimonies of their participation, marking each protest attended with its date and number. More than a mere signal of discontent or a call for visibility, the yellow vest became a personalised yet collective artefact. It reinforced identification with the movement while sustaining multiple interpretations.

The fourth use of the empty signifier, however, extends beyond simple personal appropriation. It describes a situation in which the high-visibility vest truly represents anything – embodying a general *ras-le-bol* that fuelled the movement, allowing demands that were not only diverse but often incompatible to coexist, whether on the same roundabout or within the same march. As noted earlier, the movement attracted protesters from contrasting ideological backgrounds and remained remarkably broad, both at the grassroots level – as observed in Jaunet – and among its most prominent figures.

It is worth noting that the incoherencies frequently associated with the 'negative' empty signifier reappear in a different form in this fourth use of the term. This approach offers a particular understanding of emptiness as a lack of coherent meaning, manifesting as ambiguity or vagueness (Laclau 1996a, 36; 2005a, 98; Freeden 2021, 56). Some might interpret the dysfunctional 'fifty shades of yellow' I observed in Jaunet as a consequence of this emptiness in content. Ostiguy (2023, 122) describes such symbols as 'overflowing signifiers', arguing that their vagueness allows people with different, even opposing, views to identify with the same symbol.

Whereas this is a common interpretation of his work, Laclau opposes this reading, rejecting the idea that empty signifiers are ambiguous or vague

(Laclau 2004b, 280). Ambiguity, in his view, refers to a signifier that means different things to different people simultaneously. Vagueness, in its turn, implies an ideological underdevelopment. For Laclau, neither of these characteristics would inhabit populism. On the contrary, he argued that the 'emptiness' of empty signifiers enables them to unite diverse demands, creating coherence rather than lacking it (Laclau 2005a, 98).

The problem is that his examples and explanations can often lead one at least to consider that it is the vague content of the empty signifier that is at the roots of its attraction. For instance, Laclau (2005a, 180–81, 216) says that a leader's success might rely not only on their charisma but also on the vagueness of their discourse. Moreover, he also explicitly acknowledges (2005a, 98–99, 118) on multiple occasions that wider popular movements are marked by '"vagueness" and "imprecision"'. As he says,

> [When the] tendentially empty signifier becomes *entirely* empty … the links in the equivalential chain do not need to cohere with each other at all: the most contradictory contents can be assembled, as long as the subordination of them all to the empty signifier remains. (Laclau 2005a, 217)

This passage highlights another contradiction in the different uses of the empty signifier. A poorly defined signifier would seem to weaken the need for a chain of equivalences and the horizontal solidarity that defines the second use of the concept. I will return to this point shortly, examining it in greater depth. In any case, Laclau (1987, 30–31) does not appear to see it as a problem. He says the success of populism depends precisely on its meagre content: 'The so-called "poverty" of the populist symbols is the condition of their political efficacy', he concedes (Laclau 2005b, 40).

Fifth use of the term: a symbol pointing to a non-saturated symbolic space – an open identity

So far, the various uses of the empty signifier provide little basis for assessing the radical democratic character of the Yellow Vests movement. If anything, describing the yellow vest as an empty signifier appears to reinforce a fantasmatic logic, constructing a vague, catch-all opposition between the 'people' and Macron as a hostile antagonist. Yet could the yellow vest also serve as a symbol of democracy?

Among the demonstrators, many sought to transform it into precisely that. '*Faché pas facho*' (Peeved, not fascists), read a sign held by protesters I accompanied during a march in Paris. Other symbols evoked radical democracy – more

directly, the 'conflicting aesthetics' discussed in the previous chapter. In a road blockade in the Occitan countryside, the Yellow Vests arranged for an artist to paint a giant portrait of an ordinary man wearing a yellow vest, representing the anonymous, vulnerable citizen challenging the powerful. In a similarly symbolic act of defiance, a group of protesters coordinated the removal, inversion and desecration of Macron's official portrait in city halls and other public spaces – an offence punishable by a fine of several hundred euros under French law.

Uncanny symbols will be discussed further in Chapter 6. For now, I contend that they can, in fact, be understood through the concept of empty signifier. Laclau, I argue, introduces a fifth use of the term, one that aligns with radical democracy. Here, the emptiness of the empty signifier constructs and points to the non-saturation of the symbolic space. The incompleteness of the symbolic order is not merely acknowledged but is itself represented as such (Laclau 2000b, 199).

In a polite response to my work, Ostiguy (2023, 108) argues that this interpretation amounts to projecting my own reading onto Laclau's work. I acknowledge that this perspective is heterodox. My critique of Laclau's ethical deficit remains valid, as he has frequently presented the empty signifier as carrying a fantasmatic promise of communitarian fullness, reinforcing the illusion that a complete and unified community is achievable (Laclau 1996a, 43). However, I argue that an underdeveloped radical democratic reading of the empty signifier – one that distinguishes between emancipatory and reactionary populism – emerges from the core of Laclau's writing, particularly in his critique of a form of populism where the signifier is not truly empty: ethno-populism.

According to Laclau (2005a, 108, 196, 217), a tendentially empty signifier can gather a wide range of unsatisfied demands – potentially encompassing almost all of them – allowing the equivalential chain to expand irresistibly and indefinitely. Based on this premise, he argues that in ethno-populism this process is constrained. The 'people' in ethno-populism remains more particular, unable to indefinitely incorporate new demands, as seen in its exclusion of the agendas of immigrants and other minorities (Laclau 2005a, 196–97) – or, more starkly, by their outright expulsion, as seen among the Yellow Vests in the distressing xenophobic mob-like scenes from Flixecourt described in the previous chapter. Laclau's conception of ethno-populism has important implications for the way identity is understood. More broadly, this reading suggests that the signifier 'nation', particularly when framed in purely ethnic terms, cannot function as an empty signifier, as it refers to a fixed, positive identity within a discourse that seeks to stabilise meaning once and for all.

Following this reasoning, it is possible to conclude that, while signifiers that are not truly empty try to constitute closed identities, a signifier would be genuinely empty if it pointed towards an openness, a certain indeterminacy. Therefore, the signifier 'people' in authentic populist discourse could be a point of reference for an open identity that, accepting its own incompleteness, can bring together several demands in larger chains of equivalences.

In this sense, the empty signifier would not be 'master' in Lacan's terms, as the last reference of meaning. On the contrary, it is precisely the symbol of the radical contingency of meaning, of an openness of meaning. Here, the emptiness of the empty signifier could be associated with Lefort's ([1983] 1986, 27) 'empty place' of power that plays a major role in radical democracy.

In psychoanalytical terms, the idea here is that the empty signifier in radical democratic populism would not constitute a fantasy of a closed identity and full enjoyment but would rather indicate a way of traversing fantasy and accepting the loss of full enjoyment as such. It would move beyond the tortuous paths of the fantasies of full enjoyment, or the construction of thieves of enjoyment (Zicman de Barros 2020, 518–19; Laclau 2005a, 119, 226). It is a signifier that goes beyond the moralism that opposes good and evil. This would be a signifier that allows the questioning of all fantasies traversing a discourse in a way that 'illusion transcends itself, destroys itself, showing that it is there only as a signifier' (Lacan [1960] 2019, 227).

A concept to abandon?

The polysemy that I have encountered in the notion of empty signifier could suggest that the concept is inherently problematic and should perhaps be abandoned. Interestingly, this appears to be Mouffe's position. In a side conversation at a conference in June 2019, she explicitly told me that she had always opposed Laclau's term, arguing that it generated confusion and should be replaced by the notion of the 'hegemonic signifier'. One might consider whether a hegemonic signifier, as conceived by Mouffe, would be closer to Lacan's master signifier and provide greater coherence to the concept. Yet I disagree with this perspective. As Derrida (1972, 58–59; 1996, 15) argues, while clarity is always desirable, concepts inevitably remain haunted by aporias. When an empirical case – such as the Yellow Vests movement – brings these tensions to light, this should not lead to the outright dismissal of theory. On the contrary, some of the most compelling advances in political theory emerge precisely from engaging with these blind spots rather than attempting to resolve them. In turn, retroductively, this theoretical reassessment enriches the very understanding of the Yellow Vests.

An inequivalent people

I have already mentioned a few contradictions between uses of the notion of empty signifier that have surfaced in the study of the Yellow Vests. Here, however, I wish to return to a specific one. Before addressing it, it is essential to emphasise that, throughout Laclau's work, the empty signifier has been presented as playing a crucial role in political struggles. The confrontation between the Yellow Vests and Macron can be understood as a contest between competing empty signifiers, each seeking to hegemonise the French political space in its own way. On one side, the Yellow Vests tried to hegemonise the public space in antagonistic terms, separating the 'people', embodied in a yellow vest, against the 'elites'. On the other, Macron and his allies pursued a post-democratic strategy, seeking to absorb public discontent through administrative means while portraying critics as unruly.[2]

Yet even more perplexing forms of political struggle can be analysed through the concept of empty signifier – namely, the 'internal' disputes over its meaning. One might argue that the dispute between the Yellow Vests and Macron revolved around competing claims to the empty signifier 'people'. However, within the Yellow Vests themselves, there was also an ongoing struggle to define what their central symbol – the high-visibility vest – actually stood for.

As noted repeatedly since the introduction, the movement drew protesters from across the ideological spectrum. Furthermore, this ideological diversity did not always translate into cohesion. On the contrary, the movement was characterised by what Michael Freeden (2021, 55–56) describes as 'ideological fluidity', where points of agreement and discord coexisted. Butler (2016, 29) similarly observes that no uprising is fully coherent or monolithic, as movements always encompass internal tensions and competing claims. Within its diversity, an empty signifier such as the yellow vest became a site of contestation. As Laclau (2005a, 118) notes, while the act of naming can create unity out of differences, the 'ambiguous' and 'imprecise' content of a signifier opens the path for disputes. In Laclau's terms, despite its central role, the empty signifier itself also functioned as a floating signifier – its meaning remained unfixed and became the object of hegemonic struggles.

[2] Whereas the president's name itself may be at the root of macronism, Myriam Revault d'Allonnes (2021, 41, 49, 59) demonstrates how it is intertwined with a broader network of masterwords – such as 'autonomy', 'responsibility', 'merit', 'efficiency', 'start-up nation' – which echo what Foucault ([1979] 2004, 232) describes as the ideal of the 'entrepreneur of the self'.

Within the Yellow Vests movement, tensions surfaced both among prominent figures and at the grassroots level. Disagreements emerged not only over which revendications should take priority (Jeanpierre 2019, 30–31) but also over whether addressing demands to the government risked reinforcing its authority rather than challenging it (Rancière 2019, 162). As I further explain in the first appendix, from the very first 'national coordination' meeting, accusations of betrayal erupted among the movement's informal leadership over competing agendas – a dynamic I also witnessed in Jaunet, where occupiers similarly turned against one another.

The very emergence of the RIC as a central demand can be interpreted as an attempt to harmonise divergent positions. If different factions of the movement could not agree on how to address contentious issues such as immigration and taxation, they could at least defer these disputes to future referendums. Yet even this seemingly unifying demand failed to bridge the divides. Weekly marches in major cities became another site of confrontation, as some right-wing participants denounced the presence of left-wing red flags as an attempt to co-opt the movement, while left-wing factions responded with the above-mentioned posters reading '*Faché pas facho*', aiming to distance the movement from the far right. One masked anarchist participant I interviewed described their presence at the demonstrations as an opportunity to 'literally kick' far-right elements out of the movement.

Indeed, these tensions sometimes led to outright violence. As Laclau (2014, 263) observes, disputes 'between fractions at the heart of the popular camp' may acquire 'tragic dimensions'. Such was the case on 9 February 2019, during the Yellow Vests' thirteenth weekly demonstration in Lyon, mentioned in the introduction. As radical left and extreme-right Yellow Vests factions converged on Avenue Lafayette, verbal insults rapidly escalated into a physical clash that lasted nearly ten minutes before police intervened with tear gas. The incident left three injured and resulted in over twenty arrests.

These internal conflicts bring the discussion back to the conceptual tension at stake: the contradiction between the empty signifier as a demand that articulates other struggles and the empty signifier as an ambiguous or imprecise symbol carrying divergent – even contradictory – meanings for different actors. As Laclau himself seems to acknowledge, this incoherence challenges the very notion of a chain of equivalences – the horizontal solidarity that underpins populist mobilisation. This contradiction compels consideration of a situation largely neglected in both Freud's and Laclau's accounts of identification.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, identification is a process of internalisation in which the subject adopts an external image of who they ideally ought to become. This is why the ego can be described as an alter-ego: as suggested

in the first chapter, identity is always constituted in relation to an external image that, by definition, remains outside the self (Lacan [1962] 2003, 11). Yet this process is never solitary, as these images are always mediated through the gaze of others (Lacan [1964] 2014, 298). In a psychoanalytic cliché, Freud ([1921] 1955, 105–7) traces identification back to its manifestations in early childhood, in the libidinal bond between the infant and their caregivers. He later outlines more complex models of identification in adulthood, ultimately extending it to the mass formations.

Freud ([1921] 1955, 112–13, 115–16) indicates two axes of identification within mass formations. The vertical axis concerns the collective's fascination with a leader or guiding idea, with this authoritative symbol embodying the members' ideals. In this sense, identification does not necessarily mean that subjects wish to *be* the leader – as Freud ([1921] 1955, 134–135) himself notes, in some circumstances such a will would be ridiculous – but rather that they internalise a trait or quality of the leader as a model for what they ideally ought to become. Through this process, they seek to be recognised as part of the ideal image that the leader embodies: to see themselves, and to be seen by others, as belonging to what that image represents – the 'people', or whichever collective ideal is at stake. The horizontal axis, in contrast, links members to one another through their shared love for this leader or idea. Laclau (2005a, 56) reinterprets this dynamic, suggesting that a common fascination with a signifier enables subjects to form fraternal bonds within the mass.

However, Freud himself acknowledges that the horizontal axis is not always stable. In his reflections on primal and ambivalent identification, he describes situations where identification is marked by rivalry and 'a wish for someone's removal' (Freud [1921] 1955, 105). Similarly, Laclau's idea of an empty signifier whose content is poorly defined allows for an understanding of how identification within a movement does not always involve the expected horizontal solidarity between members of a mass.

Although Freud and Laclau treat these moments of fragmentation as marginal complications within their broader theories, they provide insight into the internal fractures of the Yellow Vests. The movement's internal strife points to an alternative configuration, one in which members share a common reference point yet remain deeply hostile to one another. Rather than fostering unity, identification with a shared signifier may, under certain conditions, generate fragmentation, with rival factions vying for primacy. In such instances, what emerges is not a chain of equivalences but an 'inequivalent people'.

Various modes of identification

The idea of an inequivalent people, latently present in Freud's reflections on rivalry and Laclau's observations on fratricidal struggles within the popular camp, challenges the horizontal identification scheme and the very idea of a chain of equivalences. In doing so, it opens up possibilities for a more nuanced understanding of mass formation, allowing for the consideration of movements that lack mutual solidarity among their components and the internal struggles over their meaning. However, this idea can be pushed even further to challenge another underlying assumption that shapes Freud's – and even Laclau's – work.

Indeed, what interests me most is the possibility of conceiving another form of inequivalence – one that draws on the fifth, radical democratic use of the empty signifier. This opens space for considering movements that are not *ethically* monolithic.

The issue here is that Freud restricts his understanding of mass formations to a single mode of identification: identification through idealisation. Freud ([1921] 1955, 116) associates the process of identification with idealisation, as illustrated in his well-known yet overly complex graph reproduced below. In mass formation, Freud argues, subjects engage in a shared process of idealisation, placing a leader or guiding idea – termed the 'external object' – in the position of an ideal. Idealisation, however, operates as a blinding, fantasmatic process. It binds subjects uncritically to a symbol, fostering unconditional commitment and submission to authority.

Freud's graph depicts a homogeneous mass captivated by a hypnotising fascinating symbol, leaving no space for diversity or critical engagement. Even if one accepts the idea of an inequivalent people and disrupts the horizontal axis of Freud's framework, the masses remain ethically uniform, as the identification process fosters moralistic adherence rather than radical democratic

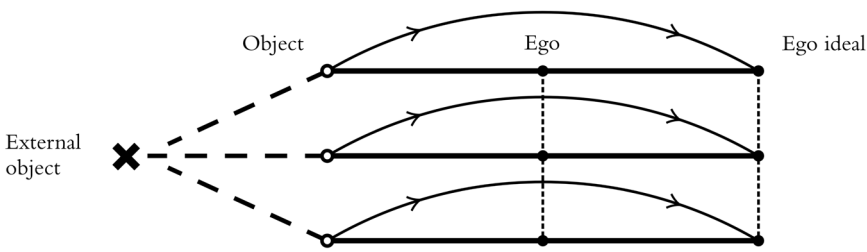

Figure 3.2 Mass formation and idealisation process.

Source: Freud [1921] 1955, 116, adapted.

openness. And this rigidity poses risks of degenerating into undemocratic practices (Freud [1921] 1955, 113). It is no coincidence that psychoanalysts tend to be suspicious of the masses – with Lacan ([1964] 2014, 302–5) openly contrasting the dynamics of the masses with the dynamics of analysis.

Laclau, despite enriching Freud's framework, encounters a similar challenge. Once again, this is a consequence of his ethical deficit. While his work highlights the potential for internal diversity in popular movements, such as the coexistence of multiple interpretations of an empty signifier (Laclau 2005a, 181) and the persistence of internal frictions within collective movements, his account of identification still centres on the blinding idealisation of a symbol (Laclau 2004a, 135). Despite the variety of ideological positions within a popular moment his work accounts for, the masses are still *ethically* homogeneous. There are differences between groups, which might interpret the empty signifier differently, but in each case one is still confined to variations of unconditional commitment or fantasmatic identification. Yet, I as have claimed, Laclau's work also offers unexplored possibilities for rethinking identification, particularly through his fifth use of the concept of empty signifier.

Laclau's fifth use of the concept of empty signifier allows for thinking of an alternative mode of identification, not based on idealisation. A mode of identification that embraces the porosity and radical contingency of identity. Furthermore, combining it with the idea of an inequivalent people, it is also possible to consider the coexistence of different modes of identification, aesthetic experiences and ethical stances within the same mass formation, within the same movement, around the same signifiers.

In the following chapters, I will delve deeper into the coexistence of multiple modes of identification. Through my psychosocial interviews and analyses, I will examine how collective identities took shape within the Yellow Vests movement. This inquiry calls for a more sustained engagement with psychoanalytic political theory, providing the tools to navigate the complexity and fluidity of these identification processes and their interrelations. To this end, I will turn to the category of fantasy, alongside key concepts such as symptom, sublimation and drive. But, before embarking on this journey, one crucial notion calls for closer attention – the notion of desire.

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4

Demands and desire in a French roundabout

'It is all a matter of image!' (*Tout est une question d'image!*). These were Éric Drouet's words as he was arrested on 2 January 2019 for leading an unauthorised march (Le Bart 2020, 70). In uttering them, he was hoping that the videos of his arrest – captured, broadcast and dissected by the media – would boost the movement. At first glance, his statement may seem self-evident, almost banal. But beneath its apparent triviality lies a crucial insight into the logic of the Yellow Vests and contemporary protests at large. More than that, it opens a door to understanding how these movements relate with radical democracy.

Drouet's words reveal something fundamental: the Yellow Vests were not merely a movement of grievances but one of aesthetic and performative transgression. As I have previously argued, their transgression lay in drawing the invisible onto the public stage. The high-visibility vest become a prop of a defiant spectacle – a cry to be seen. It is not by chance that the Yellow Vests' weekly Saturday protests were called 'acts' – a term that, beyond its political and even psychoanalytical connotations, resonates deeply with aesthetic performance. The roundabout became a site of *mise-en-scène*, of apparition. It was a space for artistic and ludic, yet undeniably political, performances. The marches, too, were moments of collective appearance, where bodies gathered to enact a crowd of yellow vests. Behind all this, Ravelli (2020, §8) identifies a '*désir de mettre en scène*' (desire to stage or perform). The word desire is central here.

In the previous chapter, I argued that various modes of identification can coexist within the same mass movement. By the end of this book, I will use psychoanalysis to discuss how radical democratic and undemocratic modes of identification coexist among the Yellow Vests. A central category to understand these modes of identification is desire. I claim that desire is what lies

behind the search to be seen, the aesthetic performances of the Yellow Vests. Moreover, contrary to Laclau, I argue that desire, not demands, underpins the construction of collective identities.

Psychosocial interviews

To understand what desire is and its role in the construction of collective identities, I must distance myself from Drouet and the summit of the Yellow Vests movement for a moment. Instead, I will do a detour to those at the grassroots level of the movement and introduce some psychosocial interviews I conducted in Jaunet. The psychosocial interviews followed an adapted version of the protocol established by Hollway and Jefferson (2000, 37–38) and consisted of the following semi-structured questions:

1. Could you tell me the impact of the Yellow Vests movement on your life?
2. Could you tell me moments of indignation in your life?
3. Could you think of anything that you saw or heard of recently that caused you indignation?
4. Could you tell me moments of *colère* [choler, anger or rage] in your life?
5. Could you tell me about recent moments of your life when you felt anguished?
6. Could you tell me past moments of your life when you felt anguished?
7. Could you tell me how it felt to demonstrate?

The references to affects such as indignation and *colère* are based on two words used by the demonstrators themselves. As discussed in previous chapters, the notion of anguish is a central affect in philosophy and psychoanalysis, and it is introduced here following Hollway and Jefferson's (2000, 19–21) suggestion that the different ways of dealing with anguish, and the fantasies constructed in the process, generally imply different ethical positions. In all cases, the main aim of the semi-structured questionnaire is to invite the interviewee to engage in what psychoanalysis calls the process of free association, providing some access to unconscious dynamics. The questions are designed to gather information that will enable one to reflect on how each interviewee's subjective path is linked to their political engagement.

Meeting Gabriel

As discussed in the introduction, some interviews stood out as paradigmatic, shedding light on the dynamics of collective identification processes (Glynos

and Howarth 2007, 204). One of the most striking was the conversation with Gabriel, the last Yellow Vest demonstrator I interviewed during my initial stay in Jaunet. It was my third interview of the day, and I expected it to follow the usual pattern. Gabriel was, in fact, the youngest interviewee I had encountered so far – only twenty years old – but I had no reason to anticipate anything out of the ordinary.

He arrived slightly late, pulling up in a car plastered with Yellow Vest stickers. A yellow vest was draped over the steering wheel, and he proudly pointed out that even his keychain bore a miniature version of it. This level of investment in the movement was striking.

Typically, psychosocial interviews take place outside the roundabout occupations, with participants dressed in their everyday clothes. Gabriel, however, arrived wearing a yellow vest. It was the first and only time an interviewee spoke to me dressed in this way. His vest was covered in drawings, each representing a city where he had demonstrated since the movement began. Every weekend, he travelled to a different location, following the decisions of the movement's leading figures, who organised weekly protests across France.

The interview itself was more challenging than expected. Despite his evident pride in displaying Yellow Vest symbols, Gabriel initially seemed reserved – almost monosyllabic. In a psychosocial interview, this presents a significant challenge, as the method relies on free association. While strategies exist to navigate such situations, they demand considerable effort from the interviewer.

Following the pre-established protocol, I responded to his brief statements with follow-up questions, ensuring minimal guidance in the associative process. This often involved repeating his words in question form, as recommended by Hollway and Jefferson (2000, 36). For instance, when asked how the Yellow Vests movement had impacted his life, Gabriel simply replied, 'Oh, it changed everything'. Silence followed. One does not expect this kind of answer without some further explanation. My reaction, following the protocol, was to return his speech with a question mark at the end: 'It changed everything?'

As the conversation progressed, it became clear that his brevity was not merely due to shyness but rather to a difficulty engaging with the associative process.

I then moved on to some personal questions.

– What do you like to do in your life?
– I like to travel.
– Where do you travel, for example?
– I usually go to the beach.

– And how was it?
– I went there once with my parents, but the last two times I went there alone.
– How alone?
– Just me. You know, I am new in town, so I do not have many friends here.

His response caught me off guard. I had assumed he was from the region. He clarified that he had indeed been born there but had moved away with his family as a child.

– I moved back here recently with my parents to be closer to the rest of the family, so I do not know many people. I do not have many friends here.
– Oh, ok. When did you move back here?
– Hmm… I would say around seven years ago.

Considering that Gabriel was twenty at the time of the interview, this struck me as unexpected. If he had returned seven years earlier yet still felt isolated, it suggested a relatively solitary youth. This loneliness surfaced again and again – when he spoke of his reasons for joining the movement, his school years, his job.

Although younger than most Yellow Vest participants, Gabriel said he preferred being around older people, as they were respectful and kind. He had disliked school – not because of the teachers, whom he found acceptable, but because of his classmates. In his view, they were not there to study or learn but to mock, bully and be cruel – '*faire n'importe quoi*' – especially to those perceived as weaker.

Gabriel's account hinted at learning difficulties. He spoke about them in relation to his school years and mentioned that he still struggled to focus on tasks for extended periods. Though he did not state it outright, it seemed evident that these challenges had hindered his integration at school and possibly made him a target for bullying. Now a manual worker in a small business, he described his work environment as isolating – he spent most of the week working alone and disliked it.

He said that he needs 'to move' (*bouger*). And he kept repeating it. When I asked what he meant, he explained: 'To be in big cities, surrounded by people'. The idea of movement resonated on multiple levels. There was the obvious connection between moving and the idea of a car – the object that had ignited the protests in the first place. Le Bart (2020, 64) describes a 'frustrated

will of mobility' at the heart of the movement, a dynamic that, for Gabriel, may have profound subjective repercussions. I cannot help but wonder how his participation in the *movement* might enable him to *move*.

An insight from countertransference

Before continuing, I must acknowledge that, although the interview followed research protocols and I remained highly focused on his responses, a few minutes after leaving, I felt the after-effects of what might be described as 'countertransference' – Freud's ([1910] 1957, 144–45) term for the analysand's unconscious influence over the analyst. While the interview did not take place within an analytic setting, transference is a feature of any human relationship (Freud [1924] 1959, 42). It inevitably occurs due to the ways in which one subject affects another, shaped by the attributes one ascribes to oneself and the other. In psychoanalysis, transference must assume a particular configuration and is worked through differently, but both sides remain implicated. This is why Lacan ([1961] 2001, 194, 197) blurs the distinction between transference and countertransference.

Alone, mentally revisiting the interview and attempting to connect certain elements, I found myself distressed by Gabriel's testimony. A sense of unease arose as I considered his situation. He appeared to have been lonely for some time – aloof, isolated and struggling to grasp what was going on. His initial monosyllabic responses had likely prompted me to invest considerable effort in formulating follow-up questions and paying especially close attention to his answers. This dynamic may have shaped my experience of the encounter.

Although Hollway and Jefferson do not address countertransference, following Freud and Lacan, one should not assume that its presence compromises the quality of research. On the contrary, transference and countertransference are inevitable – indeed, to some extent, necessary for a fruitful analytic process. It is important to describe this moment, as it was through this intense experience – realising that the movement had enabled Gabriel to forge significant social bonds that he had felt missing in his life – that I first formulated the hypothesis now to be developed.

As the previous chapter should have made clear, Laclau considered demand the central concept in the construction of political identities. Yet, despite its prominence in his framework, this concept had puzzled me since my earliest readings of Laclau many years ago. Gabriel's interview opened my eyes to the possibility that desire, rather than demand, should occupy this place. As I will elaborate in the following pages, drawing on a Lacanian perspective, desire expresses a will to be recognised, to gather, to be among others, to be loved.

Of course, this hypothesis was reinforced by other interviews. During my second stay in Jaunet, I spoke with Louis, a seventy-two-year-old former military man and retired truck driver. When asked about the impact of the Yellow Vests movement, he replied that it had allowed 'love and fraternity' to re-emerge among the people. A similar message emerged in my conversation with Emilia, a sixty-five-year-old retired self-employed manual worker. She had been involved in the movement from its inception, occupying the roundabout since the very first weekend. From the outset of the discussion, she emphasised the importance of social bonds:

- How did the Yellow Vests movement impact your life?
- It allowed us to create bonds [*Ça nous a permis de créer des liens*].
- What kind of bonds are we talking about?
- Social bonds. A space for discussion, for sharing [*partage*]. This is what matters the most. This is what we needed the most. And this is what they [referring to politicians] tried to channel, and even to destroy, by forcing the people to separate. They destroyed our islets [the occupied roundabouts], you see?

Emilia's reference to the occupied roundabout as islets (*îlots*) is striking. At first glance, the term might suggest isolation. Yet she went on to explain that she saw them as safe havens in the middle of an ocean. Their eviction, in her view, was akin to the government casting people adrift into open waters. The roundabout had functioned as a refuge – a space of security for those who had felt alone. Far from merely fostering 'weak ties' (Gerbaudo 2012, 30–31), the movement forged deep bonds. 'It is our family now', Thierry, a retired worker from Jaunet, told me. He had even spent New Year's Eve on the roundabout with fellow occupiers. Indeed, several interviewees likened those gathered there to a family, a recurring theme throughout the movement – Jérôme Rodrigues, one of its national figures, whom I mention the first appendix of this book, frequently described it in these terms (Jeanpierre 2019, 72).

For many participants, the experience of coming together was profoundly meaningful and enjoyable. Isabelle, whom I have already introduced, testified to this: 'Until now, I was feeling isolated, not in the right place. And now I feel that I am at the right place.'

Paolo Gerbaudo (2017, 170) describes such moments as 'popular communion', while Le Bart (2020, 49) speaks of a 'communitarian nostalgia' – a longing to gather in an increasingly fragmented society. In the 'forgotten France', the movement became more than a means of drawing attention to their grievances or demanding recognition from the state. Beyond the high-visibility

vests, people began to recognise each other. What mattered most, as Ravelli (2020, §§5–6) observes, was that the roundabout served as both a living space and a site of solidarity.

A theoretical and empirical problem

The intense interview with Gabriel, corroborated by the other conversations discussed above, ultimately provided an answer to the problems I identified in Laclau's notion of demand – problems that, in my view, were both theoretical and empirical. From a theoretical perspective, the concept of demand, which lies at the core of Laclau's work, has always seemed to contradict his post-foundationalist and anti-essentialist stance on collective identities, particularly in the context of populism. Laclau consistently argued that there are no solid, immutable foundations upon which social practices and collective identities can be grounded. Instead, social practices are radically contingent discursive performances that take place within an inconsistent symbolic order – one that lacks firm grounding and can therefore be questioned and profoundly transformed. This is, as discussed in Chapter 2, a key pillar of radical democratic theory.

At first glance, the idea of demand as the basic unit of political analysis appears to support this position. On the opening page of his most well-known work, Laclau (2005a, ix, 72–73) presents the notion of demand as an alternative to the idea of group. He contends that the concept of group is problematic precisely because groups possess identities, and if they are taken as the fundamental unit of political analysis, their identities – workers, women, blacks, gays and so on – are treated as pre-existing and unchangeable. This construction does not allow for the articulation of identities in a way that might transform them. Instead, it merely assembles them side by side, leaving their particular characteristics untouched. Within this framework, there is no way to interrogate or reshape these identities. For Laclau, theorising in terms of demands offers a means to question identities, as the identity of a 'people' is not given but rather the product of articulating multiple demands. Through an empty signifier, different demands become equivalent insofar as they are defined by their unfulfilled condition, attributed to an antagonistic other.

While Laclau's approach appears to circumvent essentialism in the analysis of broader movements united under the name of the 'people', his notion of demand nonetheless seems to retain unintended essentialist assumptions on a smaller scale – what I have called an 'essentialism of demands' (Zicman de Barros 2020, 512). Although demands can be articulated in different ways and take on different meanings in distinct discursive contexts, Laclau still

appears to rely on what I call a *noyau dur* of demands. He does acknowledge, albeit briefly, that demands are constructed and emerge only within specific contexts. For instance, he contends (Laclau 2013, 15–17) that classical populism confronted an amorphous and disorganised mass that lacked the capacity to articulate grassroots demands, whereas contemporary populism operates within a structured civil society where autonomous movements articulate clear demands. Yet despite these remarks, a recurring tendency remains in his work to assume that demands are given, at least within a certain background. It is as though every demand – whether economic or political – implicitly points to an immanent substrate. This particular, and arguably essential, content is represented in the lower semicircles of his well-known diagram (Laclau 2000, 303).

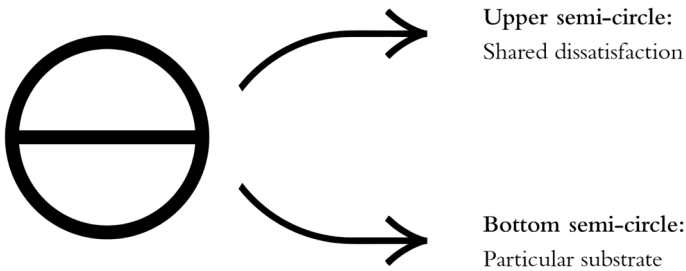

Figure 4.1 Laclau's two semicircles of a demand.

As Laclau suggests, this *noyau dur* does not vanish when incorporated into broader popular movements. Each struggle 'retains something of its own identity' (Laclau 1997, 304), as articulation around an empty signifier 'requires very much the persistence of the demands' in their difference and particularity (Laclau 2005b, 46). Beneath the shared dissatisfaction, there remain particular substrates that the process of articulation cannot erase – so much so that, in certain passages, the very distinction between group and demand becomes blurred (Laclau 2005b, 37).

One can understand why Laclau fell into what I have called essentialism of demands by considering the context in which he was writing. When Laclau and Mouffe (1985, 167) published their seminal work, their aim was to integrate new social movements into political analysis, countering the homogenising tendencies of traditional Marxism (see also Laclau 1985, 27; 1987, 33). Their argument sought to demonstrate how these movements could be articulated within a broader popular front without dissolving their particular characteristics into a monolithic identity. However, this approach presupposes that these particular characteristics, which must be preserved, exist in themselves prior to articulation. Consequently, I argue that Laclau's concept of demand

should be decomposed to uphold his theoretical framework while eliminating leftovers of essentialism that remain unresolved.

As noted above, beyond theoretical inconsistencies, reducing protest movements to their demands has serious empirical drawbacks, weakening political analysis. Recent studies suggest a different, more fruitful approach. Jeanpierre (2019, 103) argues that the Yellow Vests were united not by specific demands but by the solidarity networks they built. Conversely, by conforming their diffuse discontent to the grammar of demands – particularly the expectation of 'coherent' demands imposed by governments and mainstream media – the movement ended up losing part of its strength (Jeanpierre 2019, 29–31). Arditi (2022, 63–64, 67) also notes that, in recent indignation movements, demands have been secondary, with the main driver being the collective will to gather and act together. The sharpest critique comes from Eklundh (2019, 148), who rejects the idea that political subjectivity is shaped by well-defined demands. She argues that demands are fluid, constantly changing, or may not even be recognised as demands. Crucially, she suggests (Eklundh 2019, 132) that framing contemporary indignation movements around demands – whether economic or democratic – misses the deeper issue: all collective mobilisation is underpinned by a 'crisis of subjectivity', which precedes and exceeds the articulation of demands.

Demands or desire?

My psychosocial interviews with the Yellow Vests opened my eyes to how a study of Lacan's concept of demand could offer valuable insights for decomposing the essentialist remnants in Laclau's work and understanding the 'crisis of subjectivity' discussed by Eklundh. This leads me to argue that the formation of collective identities is shaped more by desire than by demand. To develop this argument in theoretical terms, I must first introduce several Lacanian concepts – briefly, and hopefully without excessive complexity. I will begin with a summary of the notion of drive. While not central to this chapter, clarifying it here will help prevent confusion later in the book. I will then discuss the relationship between demand and desire, which will allow me to present in a new light ideas previously discussed, such as the lack that defines the subject and the concept of fantasy.

It all starts, for sure, in the most common psychoanalytic cliché: early childhood and the relationship between the newborn and the caregiver. As Lacan ([1960] 1966, 810) claims, human babies are all born premature, entirely dependent on their caregivers – most often the mother – for survival. Furthermore, as he puts it, for the newborn, everything is overwhelming.

The newborn cries too much, screams too much, poops too much. The newborn knows no boundaries. There is no frontier marking where the baby's mouth ends and the mother's breast starts. Mother and baby exist in near symbiosis. It was to this experience that Freud's ([1929] 1961, 65) interlocutors spoke of an 'oceanic feeling', a term mentioned in the previous chapters.

It is from this context of near symbiosis between the baby and the mother that one understands the notion of drive. Drive is one of the more intricate notions in psychoanalysis. Freud called it 'indispensable' yet unclear ([1915] 1957, 117), 'the most important and most obscure' ([1920] 1955, 34), and 'formidable in its indetermination' ([1933] 1964, 95). As he explains, the drive straddles the boundary between the body and the mind, the somatic and the symbolic (Freud [1915] 1957, 120–22). In this sense, the drive is distinct from need. Lacan uses the term 'need' to describe that which is purely physiological – material necessities that exist independently of language or consciousness. Drive, by contrast, is already situated in the domain of language, even in its primeval form. In the symbiotic relation with the mother, in the process of satisfying the baby's needs, the mother eroticises zones of the baby's body, at the same time when the baby gets attached not to the mother as a whole but to traits of the mother. Drives, therefore, are always partial – they name the effort not to seek an object in its entirety but to seek only a trait of the object – a mnemonic trait that refers to early childhood – and find a bodily satisfaction not from grasping the object but rather from repeatedly encircling it. As Lacan ([1964] 2014, 188–89) explains, it is not from the food that the mouth gets its satisfaction but from the mouth itself – '*le plaisir de la bouche*' – as an erogenous zone.

Desire, though closely related, must be distinguished from drive. To grasp the concept of desire, one must examine the moment when the near symbiosis between mother and baby indelibly breaks down. Lacan explains this rupture as occurring when the mother is not at hand. The baby, now deprived of her immediate presence, must attract her attention – must communicate its needs. At this moment, the infant enters into language properly, and demand appears for the first time. In a nutshell, the demand is a symbolically articulated need. This demand may take rudimentary forms, such as crying. Of course, the baby's earliest reactions are not inherently symbolic. They acquire meaning only through the mother's interpretation. It is she who frames the baby's cries within a symbolic structure, assigning meaning to its tears. Language is thus imposed upon the infant. The mother teaches the baby how to demand, and in doing so initiates it into the symbolic order.

Lacan refers to this entry into language as symbolic castration. The term may seem striking but it is a metaphor drawn from Freud, signifying that these

moments of separation, which propel the baby into language, also enable the baby and the mother to be recognised as distinct entities. This process does more than establish a boundary between them – it also imposes some order – an arbitrary symbolic order – upon the baby's excesses, bringing a form of limit. Furthermore, alongside this separation from the mother, another cut takes place: a split within the subject itself. Entering language means beginning to relate to one's own name and image – symbols that remain external. There is, so to speak, an insurmountable gap between the external image of oneself and one's inner being.

This moment clarifies the concept of enjoyment and reinforces the notion of a vulnerable subject marked by a constitutive lack, as explored in previous chapters. In Chapter 1, I explained that the subjective crisis came from the lack of control over one's identity. Now it gets clearer that it also comes from the fact that one's identity relies on an external image, ultimately unmergeable with one's inner self. The connection between this lack and enjoyment is further illuminated by symbolic castration. The pre-symbolic symbiosis with the world, retrospectively idealised as an experience of full enjoyment, is ultimately lost upon entry into language. What is castrated, then, is not merely an imagined unity with the mother but the fantasy of an existence where needs were immediately satisfied. All that remains is a subject marked by a constitutive identity crisis.

Despite these detours, however, the central concept of this chapter – desire – remains to be explained. Where does desire appear? For Lacan, it emerges at the very heart of this crisis of subjectivity, precisely because the process of converting a need into a symbolic articulated demand is not straightforward. In articulating need as demand, the baby implicitly introduces a desire for recognition (Lacan [1953] 1966, 268). When the maternal figure answers the baby's demand, she, at first, recognises it, putting the baby in the position of the object of her love. In short, beyond any need and behind every demand there is desire: the baby's desire to be desired, a search for love (Lacan [1958] 1966, 629). In the previous chapter, I quoted Fink (1999, 60) who wrote that for Lacan 'all speech is demand'. Yet, I omitted the second half of his statement: 'every demand is a request for love'. This request for love, however, submits the baby to the other. In seeking love, the baby begins to adapt, conforming to the other's rules – the symbolic order, social norms – in the hope of securing the other's desire and, in some sense, restoring the idealised pre-symbolic experience of full enjoyment.

Since it is a product of language, Lacan understands that desire permeates all human relations. Transference itself is a product of desire. To clarify this further, it is useful to recall that Lacan's notion of desire draws on Alexandre

Kojève's reflections. Building on Kojève's (1947, 13) reading of Hegel ([1807] 1977, 111–19), Lacan formulates the intriguing idea of a *desire for desire* that marks human experience. From Kojève, Lacan ([1960] 1966, 802, 813) states that one's desire is, in reality, the desire of others. In other words, one desires to be desired by the other. From this perspective, all of one's actions are ultimately guided by a desire to be loved, recognised. Even those who appear motivated solely by disenchanted economic rationality may, in reality, be pursuing the social recognition attached to wealth, seeking to be acknowledged by others.[1]

Yet this quest is bound to fail. The other's desire can never be fully grasped or mastered. As interpreters such as Fink (1995, 90) correctly point out, desire itself has no specular object – it is not an ordinary object found in daily life. The other's desire manifests, for example, in the gaze (Lacan [1964] 2014, 303). But the gaze can shift, withdraw, be drawn elsewhere. It cannot be controlled. And, in seeking to capture it, one may become its captive, caught in an endless attempt to possess what will always elude possession.

Desire and fantasy

Having outlined some of the key concepts of Lacanian psychoanalysis, I hope it is now easier to grasp my argument that identification processes are guided not by demand but by desire. This distinction also clarifies a seemingly obscure statement from Lacan's ([1963] 2004, 76–77) tenth seminar on anguish, in which he 'denounces' demand:

[1] One could consider the hypothesis that subjects can be mobilised by needs alone. Some have even argued that the Yellow Vests' original demand against the carbon tax and for purchase power showed the primacy of materialist needs over post-materialist values, such as environmentalism. This view does not hold water, firstly for empirical reasons: the Yellow Vests were not hostile to environmental demands (Jeanpierre 2019, 167–68; Le Bart 2020, 94). '*Fin du monde, fin du mois, le même combat!*' (End of the world, end of the month, the same struggle!) and similar slogans were frequently sung in marches and occupations demonstrate this. Furthermore, the introduction of the idea of desire makes this position theoretically untenable. For Lacan, the subject is constituted by language, and once it emerges it is impossible to think of a need without desire. A pre-linguistic need is therefore a functional hypothesis – a 'myth', in the sense that Lacan ([1958] 1998, 90–92, 461) gives this word, that is, it refers to a subject at a moment when there was not yet a subject. As a result, even the most material demand – for example, a demand for food – will always be entwined with desire (Lacan [1956] 2018, 314). Laclau (1984, 40–41; 1990, 7–9; 2005a, 84) himself admits this, saying there was nothing in material conditions that determined the irruption of resistance movements. Even Marx ([1867] 1996, 45), of all people, states on the very first page of his *magnum opus* that human needs have their roots both in the stomach and the fancy.

> [E]very demand, even the most archaic and the most primitive, always has something deceptive with respect to what preserves the place of desire … the demand comes improperly at the place of what is eluded, the object *a*.

At first glance, this passage – especially its reference to the object *a* – may seem puzzling. However, in light of the preceding discussion, its meaning should now be clearer. Lacan's claim, in a nutshell, is that every demand conceals the true nature of desire by substituting a specular object where there should be none – where, instead, what is longed for is the other's gaze. Object *a* is the name Lacan gives to this desired desire present in the gaze. He even describes the concept as his only original contribution to psychoanalysis. Given its polyvalence and the many shifts in its definition throughout Lacan's teaching, providing a single, straightforward explanation is impossible. In this context, however, the object *a* names this desiring capacity that one desires in the other – it is what causes one's desire (Lacan [1961] 2001, 235).

At this point, it is useful to recall a concept introduced in the first chapter: fantasy. As I argued there, fantasy emerges as an attempt to provide an answer to a subjective lack. In this sense, fantasy is the reverse side of desire. Freud ([1900] 1953, 264; [1901] 1953, 667) frequently refers to 'fantasy of desire' or 'desiring fantasy', highlighting this connection. For Freud, desire emerges from dissatisfaction. Fantasy, in turn, attempts to fill this gap. However, unlike Freud, Lacan stresses that fantasy is never an adequate response to desire. Rather, it operates as a lure that animates demands. As I mentioned in Chapter 3, fantasy relies on objects – objects that promise recognition and the restoration of full enjoyment. Crucially, these objects are not to be confused with the object *a*. The object *a* is not a specular object – it is not an ordinary object that can be symbolised. The other's gaze cannot be possessed. This is why, as Lacan ([1964] 2014, 303) suggests, fantasy, embedded within demand, attempts to cover, veil or substitute for the object *a* by offering an ordinary object to cope with lack.

Moreover, as suggested in the previous chapter, fantasies are always misleading. This point requires nuance. Fantasies mislead not necessarily because they are false. It may well be true, for instance, that an elite exploits workers and that removing them from power could contribute to a fairer society. The issue with fantasy is not its relationship to reality but the affective investment it demands and the illusion of final redemption it fosters. Fantasies sustain the belief that subjective crisis can be definitively overcome. In this sense, they are unsustainable. Whether they revolve around the promise of glory or the scapegoating of 'thieves of enjoyment' – and these two are often intertwined – fantasies inevitably fail. The limits they establish, the taboos they impose, and

the transgressions they propose as gateways to full enjoyment are structurally incapable of delivering on their promises (Bucci 2021, 216). The illusory promise of full enjoyment is one of the foundational pillars of fantasy. As Freud ([1917] 1963, 372) observes, 'there is no doubt that dwelling upon fantasmatic wish-fulfilments brings satisfaction with it'. Yet, beyond this dwelling, the pre-symbolic full enjoyment fantasy conjures remains forever inaccessible.

For sure, their unattainable character constitutes a problem for fantasies. To resist, the second pillar supporting fantasies are certain experiences of partial body enjoyment from the drive that nourish the illusion that full enjoyment lies just beyond reach (Stavrakakis 2007, 196–97). For the Yellow Vests, their very rallies could play this role. Yet, in the end, such *amuse-bouches* can never satisfy the longing for an idealised pre-symbolic full enjoyment (Lacan [1973] 2016, 142).

Juliette's anguishes

While the specular objects concealing desire can structure many different fantasies and circulate a plethora of affects, Lacan claims that the non-specular object *a* is linked to a special affect previously discussed: anguish. As mentioned earlier, desire, strictly speaking, has no object – its 'object' is the non-specular object *a*. In this sense, it is interesting to notice that, at a certain point in his theorisation, Freud ([1926] 1959, 164–65) also claims that anguish, unlike fear, has no object. Fear is directed towards something, whereas anguish remains undefined. Lacan connects these two ideas and shows how object *a* and anguish are related. Confronting the non-specular object *a* in its purest form produces anguish, as it exposes the impossibility of mastering the other's gaze – the uncertainty of the other's desire (Lacan [1963] 2004, 13–14). This points to the absence of a stable foundation for the fantasy that sustains the symbolic order. Indeed, if, as previously mentioned, Lacan ([1963] 2004, 92) describes anguish as the affect that does not deceive, it is because anguish exposes the lack of basis of one's fantasies. By contrast, a demand copes with anguish by offering a fantasmatic specular object to the subject.

The idea that the other's unmasterable gaze provokes anguish is, I believe, intuitive. It was certainly a recurring theme in Lacan's intellectual milieu, particularly among authors influenced by Heidegger ([1943] 1998, 104). Sartre (1945, 93; [1965] 1992, 281–82), for instance, famously articulates this in a frequently misquoted phrase – 'Hell is other people' (*L'enfer, c'est les autres*) – which refers precisely to the haunting and often terrorising judgement implicit in the other's gaze. This illustrates how fantasy and the quest for full enjoyment do not necessarily manifest as conscious pleasure. On the contrary, because

fantasy subjects one to the other's gaze and to unattainable ideals, the search for recognition often results in super-egoic guilt, self-punishment and psychic suffering.

Another of my interviews in Jaunet reinforced this link between anguish and the enigma of the other's desire. Juliette, a nurse, trade unionist and mother of three, often felt overwhelmed yet had participated in the Yellow Vests movement from its inception. Beyond her political commitments, what struck me most was the way she recounted her personal story.

Juliette explained that she was born when her parents were still young students, which meant that her early years were spent in modest conditions. They lived in small student dormitories with little space for her. She described how, as a child, she often wore worn-out clothes, as if her parents did not care enough about her. She recalled being taken to noisy student parties late at night and spoke of the distress of constantly hearing her parents argue in ways she felt no child should have to endure. In her own words, it was 'not the right environment to raise a kid'.

This perception of parental neglect, which she linked to a *colère* towards them – one she had struggled to articulate for many years – clearly shaped the way she engaged with the other's desire. Juliette longed for recognition, openly stating that she experiences anguish when she doubts whether she is loved. She could barely hold back tears as she spoke about it. The anguish provoked by the enigma of the other's desire has consequences on both personal and political levels. On a personal level, although Juliette appeared to have a strong relationship with her husband – a fellow nurse also involved in the Yellow Vests movement, with whom she had been married for over a decade – she admitted that she frequently questioned whether he truly loved her.

Notably, Juliette's preoccupation with the other's desire and the anguish it provokes is not confined to the family sphere. Similar affective dynamics shaped her political engagement, echoing Freud's insights. According to Freud ([1926] 1959, 128, 139–42), the helplessness experienced during separation from a protective figure can resurface when one is confronted with the threat of dissolution or exclusion from the horde. Juliette's interview illustrated this process vividly. She freely associated the anguish caused by her desire to be loved with her experience in the Yellow Vests movement. She described the anguish she felt upon realising that, after the initial protests, the number of demonstrators dwindled each week. For her, this decline was not merely a matter of fading political momentum – it signified a lack of recognition for the causes she identified with. Just as the uncertainties surrounding her husband's love unsettled her, the movement's decline inflicted a form of psychic suffering. 'I want people to wake up and engage politically', she said.

First gaze: a desire for belonging

Understanding the primacy of desire in the construction of collective identities – itself a result of the psychosocial interviews with the Yellow Vests – offers valuable insights into the dynamics of the movement and, more broadly, into processes of identification. Although Laclau frequently references Lacan, he never explicitly indicates how Lacan's notion of demand influenced his own, if it did at all. As Norval (2007, 19) observes, 'the processes involved in the formation of demands' remained a neglected topic in Laclau's work. By pursuing this line of inquiry and breaking down the concept of demand, any leftovers of essentialism collapse. Demands, once considered the foundational unit of Laclau's analysis, are revealed as products rather than constitutive elements of collective identities. They are already a set of discursive constructions – a symbolic means of articulating dislocation, of translating dislocation into words. As Marchart (2012, 229–30) suggests, demands are not 'pre-fabricated' to be the basis of articulation but 'will always already be the outcome of an articulatory process'. Consequently, while Laclau's model of articulation, in which demands retain their particularity, has provided a valuable framework for analysing identification processes in recent years, reconsidering the notion of demand allows for other possibilities – such as demands that are dissolved or reconstructed, or a single signifier that unites people around a common cause, diluting other particular struggles.

More than anything, the primacy of desire in the processes of identification sheds light on the very alloy that bound the Yellow Vests together. Over a century ago, in one of his most significant political writings, Freud ([1921] 1955, 118–19) diagnosed a certain will to be with others traversing the subject, attempting to explain it through biological notions such as 'gregariousness' or 'herd instinct'. His formulations, however, remain constrained by the biologicist residues of his early theory. In contrast, Lacan's notion of desire offers a more productive avenue – one that unfolds in two directions, corresponding to two ways in which one seeks to capture the gaze of others.

Among the Yellow Vests, Lacan's concept of desire suggests, first, that desire is a desire to be together. There is a desire to capture the gaze of fellow protesters, a desire to forge social bonds, to form a community, to experience belonging. On an occupied roundabout, protesters confront the gaze of their peers – a gaze that, despite internal divisions within the movement, is generally welcoming (Jeanpierre 2019, 98–101). Juliette's interview provides anecdotal evidence of this dynamic. She clearly associated the Yellow Vests' success in bringing people together with her own desire for recognition. For her, being among others was intimately tied to being loved and provided an answer to

her personal anguishes. More important than any specific demand, therefore, she desired the people to be together – in the horde, to borrow Freud's ([1926] 1959, 139) term. Yet, unlike Freud's biologically grounded perspective, this will to be together is not innate. Desire is a product of language and can be understood in purely social and psychoanalytic terms.

The idea that the desire for recognition is central to identification processes is not entirely new. Similar arguments can be found in Rancière's work. As Norval and Howarth (2016, 306) note, Rancière engages with a 'pre-history of demands'. But what does this idea of 'pre-history' stand for? As discussed in Chapter 1, Rancière (2000, 13–14) asserts that politics is fundamentally a matter of aesthetics – a question of visibility. This becomes particularly salient when what he terms an invisible 'part of no-part' emerges to claim a place within the community (Rancière 1995, 49–50). Drawing on Rancière, Daniel de Mendonça (2014, 5–6; 2019, 193) argues that this emergence stems from a 'will of the equals' – a will to be equally counted in the construction of collective identities, particularly at the ignition of protest movements. In this light, I suggest that Rancière (2021, 112) speaks of a pre-history of demands because, before any demand is symbolically articulated, there exists a prior desire for recognition – a desire for the other's desire.

Second gaze: a desire to be seen

As suggested above, however, the idea of desire offers a second way of understanding the associative dynamics of Yellow Vests beyond the experience of belonging. This idea is implicit in Rancière but emerges more clearly in Butler and finds extensive development in the work of Bucci on contemporary uprisings.

In recent analyses on protest movements, Butler (2015, 72) reframes Arendt's ([1958] 1998, 199) notion of 'space of appearances' – which, as mentioned in Chapter 1, is not far from the idea of symbolic order. Butler extends Arendt's argument by placing bodies at the core of the space of appearances. For Butler, the space of appearances is established when bodies gather and constitute a public space. While Arendt already conceives the space of appearances as collective, dependent on others and therefore radically contingent, Butler gives this contingency a concrete, embodied form – insisting that it only exists when physical bodies are able to assemble.

Butler (2015, 25) argues that, before any clearly articulated claim is made, the very act of bodies gathering constitutes a qualitatively distinct kind of demand: a demand for assembly itself. This is a demand for appearance, for visibility, for recognition – that is, to be the object of the other's desire (Butler

2015, 19, 72–73; 2016, 13–14). It is a demand to erupt in the symbolic space that the protesters' own gathering bodies constitute in the first place. This demand for assembly is paradoxical and insurrectional, as it is enacted through the very act of gathering. In this sense, returning to the discussion in Chapter 1, it is aesthetically transgressive. It transforms reality by redrawing the boundaries of what can and cannot appear.

However, Butler's framing remains tied to the language of demand rather than desire. Butler (1987, 197–99) is well aware of the distinction – how demands obscure the constitutive lack that defines desire. They also discuss how recent protest movements deliberately avoid making explicit demands to those in power, as doing so would imply an acknowledgement of the rulers' legitimacy (Monod 2017, 13). Yet Butler (2015, 25–26; 2016, 13–15) continues to describe the gathering of bodies as expressing a diffuse demand for justice – one that, in Laclau's terms, could be articulated alongside other concrete demands. By framing it as a demand, Butler misses something crucial. What they describe as a demand for appearance in collective movements should instead be understood as a desire for recognition – an affective force that is not simply an adjunct to political action but a central element of it, beyond any specific struggle.

Here, I believe that Bucci – another insightful reader of Arendt – offers reflections that complement Butler's. Like Butler, Bucci (2016, 27–28) argues that the aesthetic and performative dimensions are key to protest movements. However, he goes beyond Butler by showing that, as seen most markedly in recent demonstrations, these aesthetic experiences are also experiences of enjoyment. His reflections expand on Butler's by elucidating the role of enjoyment in protest movements, particularly through the partial body experiences that Gerbaudo (2017, 170) describes as moments of 'popular communion', to which I referred earlier. Bucci highlights how protest movements incorporate elements that generate enjoyment – jokes, ludic expressions and other playful acts. Crucially, he also emphasises that enjoyment arises when protesters capture the desire in the other's gaze.

Bucci (2016, 33–34, 112–13) draws attention to the second gaze that structures protest movements. Beyond the mutual recognition among fellow demonstrators, there is the broader public gaze, materialised in media cameras. If there is an 'aesthetic enjoyment', as he puts it, this enjoyment is guided by the others' gaze (Bucci 2016, 28, 55; 2019, 100). Demonstrations, he argues, emerge from desire – an almost exhibitionist desire to be visible, a yearning to be seen (Bucci 2016, 113, 134). While this desire is understandable – the heterogeneous have long fought for visibility – Bucci (2016, 169; 2015, §§9–10) suggests that it is intensified by the narcissistic, exhibitionist and

fetishised dynamics of contemporary communication. Moreover, this exhibitionist 'aesthetic enjoyment' manifests across various forms of what Marchart (2019, 23) has called an 'aesthetics of conflict' – most notably through acts often labelled as 'violence' (Bucci 2016, 53, 64, 152–55, 160; 2015, §§9–10). Above all, what matters is to be seen. The imperative scrawled across the back of a yellow vest I referenced in Chapter 2 encapsulates this urgency: '*Soyons visibles!*'

With these ideas in mind, one can return to Drouet's phrase at the beginning of this chapter: 'It is all a matter of image'. The interviews with the Yellow Vests confirm that this seemingly trivial remark fully aligns with Bucci's analysis (Zicman de Barros 2022, 82–83). As Le Bart (2020, 67–69) points out, despite their criticism of political representation, the Yellow Vests also used cameras in the construction, the representation of their image.

Although the movement relied on photos, videos and live-streaming from demonstrators themselves – claiming to reject the mainstream media – Drouet's statement makes it clear that he recognised the crucial role of mainstream media in the circulation of images. Capturing media attention was not just a means for him and other prominent figures to consolidate influence over the movement's direction. More fundamentally, mainstream media gave a consistent existence to the movement by recognising it. As Nina Santos (2020a, 94–96; 2020b, 78) demonstrates, even alternative media – often operating through digital platforms – are influenced by the mainstream media. And, even when the media coverage aimed to be negative – focusing on 'violent' demonstrators whom many protesters themselves disavowed – it could still produce a positive effect, endowing the movement with an aura of rebellion (Bucci 2016, 64; Le Bart 2020, 69–70, 123, 129, 158).

It is now possible to say that the concrete content of the Yellow Vests' demands has taken a back seat. Instead, it is the protesters' desire to be visible to others and to the government that is taking the lead – and the colour of their yellow vests, as well as the way they are demonstrating, confirms this.

Desire and radical democracy

Pointing out the primacy of desire in the identification processes at play in the Yellow Vests movement says little about the radical democratic character of the movement. At first glance, there is something undoubtedly legitimate in a desire for belonging and recognition. Yet Bucci associates this same desire with narcissism and violence, framing it in a more troubling light. Moreover, this chapter has discussed that the dynamics of desire are concealed behind fantasies. Lefort, as noted in Chapter 2, speaks of a 'clash of desires' as an

emancipatory force of destitution. Drawing directly from psychoanalysis, Lefort ([1972] 2018, 722–23) argues that desire is objectless and knows no limits. However, he quickly recognises that desire does not always manifest as a force of destitution. Just as often, it takes the form of fantasies of domination and demands for sovereignty.

Did the Yellow Vests manage to transcend this dynamic – to, as Lacan would say, 'traverse fantasy' and recognise that their movement was ultimately guided by a desire for belonging and recognition? How do they navigate anguish? Does the anguish expressed in psychosocial interviews resemble a constituted anguish, from which one seeks refuge in fantasy, or a constituent anguish, which allows one to embrace radical contingency? Ultimately, were Gabriel, Juliette and the other Yellow Vests interviewed radical democrats? These questions will be examined in the next two chapters.

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5

The Yellow Vests as a symptom

On 1 December 2018, the Yellow Vests swarmed the grandest roundabout in France – the Étoile Square, where twelve avenues converge beneath the Arc de Triomphe. Under its towering arch, a monument to military victory and national glory, the battle was of another kind. Flames flickered against the stone façade as protesters set fire to rubbish bins, stormed shopping centres, shattered storefronts and clashed with the police, even when officers stood vastly outnumbered, uncertain whether to charge or retreat – a spectacle of fury, a clash of desires at its most narcissistic and violent. And it was only the beginning.

Days later, on 5 December, Éric Drouet appeared on television, doubling down: the protest should escalate. It should storm the Élysée. In an apotheotic moment, the people should seize power. The call was shocking but so were the images replayed across every news channel – masked figures battering riot shields, fire licking the sky, chaos erupting beneath the Arc de Triomphe. The movement had seized the spectacle it sought, yet the backlash was swift. The mainstream media cast the demonstrators as a monstrous, hate-fuelled mob, consumed by the sheer enjoyment of destruction (Jeanpierre 2019, 9, 22–23; Ietter 2025, 13–14). Macron responded the next day in a televised speech, condemning the violence and insisting it had no place in legitimate protest. In his words:

> What happened yesterday in Paris has nothing to do with the peaceful expression of a legitimate *colère*. No cause can justify attacking the police, looting shopping malls, burning public and private buildings, threatening ordinary citizens and journalists, damaging the Arc de Triomphe. Those responsible for this violence do not want change. They want chaos. They betray the causes they pretend to serve. They manipulate them.

As the days passed, his rhetoric only hardened. In his New Year's address on 31 December 2018, without even mentioning the movement by name, he attacked its claim to represent the 'people' and to be the voice of the 'people'. 'Some have claimed to speak on behalf of the people: but which [people], from where, how?' His government did more than speak. The crackdown in the streets was ruthless. Tear gas swirled through the roundabouts. Rubber bullets found their targets. Protesters fell, their eyes bloodied – until the wounded eye itself became another symbol of the movement.

I begin here because the dialectic of repression and revolt will run through this chapter. It inhabits one of the psychoanalytic metaphors that has been most widely used, both in the media and in academia, to describe populism in general and the Yellow Vests in particular: the metaphor of the symptom (Zicman de Barros 2022, 219–27; 2024b, 330–32). A metaphor that, I will argue, resonates with all the ambiguities of the movement.

What is a symptom?

A quick online search shows that various French newspapers have used the term 'symptom' to refer to the Yellow Vests. The movement was described as a 'symptom of a fractured France', a 'symptom of a divided society', a 'symptom of a crisis in the political system', a 'symptom of a mistrust in institutions', and even a 'symptom that rejects a world in constant acceleration'. One might argue that such references to symptoms are journalistic rather than theoretical and hold little value for conceptual reflection. Yet the term has also appeared in academic discourse. In an insightful article, Ietter (2025, 1–2) describes the Yellow Vests as a symptom. More broadly, numerous scholars have applied this concept to the study of populism, often drawing on psychoanalytic categories (Glynos 2003, 192; Stavrakakis 2007, 213).

To explain the relevance of this perspective – and why this chapter begins with repression and revolt – it is essential to recall Freud's ([1915] 1957, 154) well-known definition of the symptom as the return of the repressed. But what does this entail? What, precisely, is being repressed?

Notwithstanding Freud's deep engagement with social issues, as noted in the introduction, his writings on symptoms emerged primarily from the study of subjective processes rather than explicitly political phenomena – hence the use of psychoanalytic *metaphors* here. He defines repression as the act of 'turning something away, and keeping it at a distance, from the conscious' (Freud [1915] 1957, 147). Initially, he links repression to trauma, describing it as the exclusion of a traumatic idea too intolerable to be integrated into consciousness (Freud [1893] 1966, 170). Later, he refines this view, situating repression

within his theory of drives. As Freud ([1914] 1957, 93) explains, repression occurs when a drive 'comes into conflict with the subject's cultural and ethical ideas', many of which remain unconscious. In his later work, he emphasises that repression is enacted by psychic instances that assess external constraints but, more significantly, judge the subject from a moralistic, accusatory, and potentially masochistic perspective (Freud [1926] 1959, 90–91, 113).

In Freud's ([1909] 1955, 196) initial formulation, the drive consists of two components: a representation and a 'quota of affect' invested in it. According to Freud ([1915] 1957, 149), repression occurs when a traumatic experience severs this connection, expelling the unbearable representation into the unconscious, where 'it proliferates in the dark'. However, as he explains, while the idea itself is repressed, the detached 'quota of affect' cannot be repressed or dissolved. Instead, the psychic energy persists and resurfaces at the conscious level linked to a substitute representation. The emergence of this substitute representation is what Freud terms a symptom. The 'return of the repressed' is, therefore, the return of something the subject was unable to thematise.

The crucial question, of course, is how this relates to politics – more specifically, to populism and radical democracy. The answer is as complex as the notion of a symptom itself. Freud ([1917] 1963a, 360) famously described the symptom as an 'ingeniously chosen piece of ambiguity', one that carries 'two meanings in complete mutual contradiction'. This insight is worth bearing in mind when investigating the metaphor in political analysis. Interpretations vary significantly: for some, the symptom metaphor highlights the radical democratic potential of populism, while for others it underscores populism's threat to democracy itself.

Democratic symptoms

The police brutality against the Yellow Vests was shocking and, in some ways, fostered greater solidarity among demonstrators and even within the broader public. Repression, however, extended beyond the brute application of force. It is no coincidence that Rancière (1996, 173) invokes the notion of 'police' to describe practices that go well beyond actual policing. For him, 'police' refers to any practice that suppresses contestation – any mechanism that represses challenges to the norms of the symbolic order. In this sense, Macron's repression extended beyond the demonstrators themselves.

By framing the Yellow Vests as a symptom, Ietter (2025, 1–2) celebrates the movement. In her view, the protesters reintroduced into French political life something that had long been suppressed before the marches and occupations began: class antagonism. Hayat (2019, 26) similarly interprets the Yellow Vests as

a moral reaction to a 'political desert' in which people struggle to be heard, and no alternative finds an outlet. It was, to recall a notion introduced in Chapter 2, a post-democratic environment. As explained earlier, post-democracy stands for a context in which the institutions of liberal democracy are still in place and functioning, yet no real alternatives are permitted to compete (Mouffe 2018a, 4). All choices presented to citizens are variations of the same managerial logic. Any discourse that dares to break with this consensus is dismissed as nonsensical, inefficient and ultimately excluded from the political arena.

In Chapters 1 and 2, I examined the claim that France was experiencing post-democracy, highlighting how transitions between left- and right-wing presidencies failed to shift the overall trajectory of public policy. I argued that Macron has not only continued but intensified this dynamic. According to Myriam Revault d'Allonnes (2021, 15–16), Macron's well-known habit of saying '*en même temps*' – Macron is '*en même temps*' right and left, or neither right nor left – reflects his broader effort to suppress antagonism. In this plasticity, every conflict is integrated and resolved by Macron, and no alternative can legitimately emerge.

The notion of redemption from a post-democratic desert is central to the argument that positions populism as a symptom with radical democratic potential. Populism, in this view, redeems and radicalises democracy by disrupting the post-democratic consensus.

But how does this symptom emerge? Mouffe has explored the metaphor extensively, emphasising, as in the subjective experience of symptom formation, the affective dimension involved in the re-emergence of the repressed in the public realm. As she argues, post-democracy represses not only certain discourses but also political passions, which 'cannot find an outlet' (Mouffe 1999, 9). Yet, as with a symptom, one can suppress a discussion but not the underlying anguish associated with it (Stavrakakis 2007, 213). In practical terms, Mouffe (2018a, 18) observes that 'privatisation and deregulation policies contributed to a drastic deterioration in the conditions of the workers'. These policies generate precarisation – both economic and subjective – leading to feelings of anguish and helplessness, which Laclau (1990, 39) terms dislocation.

In this context, the emergence of the 'people' as a discursive force within the Yellow Vests movement – and within populism more broadly – can be understood as the resurfacing of what post-democracy seeks to repress. This irruption symbolises the return of suppressed antagonisms, injecting conflict back into the political sphere and disrupting the illusion that no alternatives exist. By foregrounding the radically contingent nature of established social practices, populism reopens possibilities for contestation and reinvigorates democratic life.

Yet, although Mouffe's analysis is often associated with the idea of populism as a symptom, she never explicitly made this connection. The scholar who most prominently advanced this metaphor, particularly in its redemptive dimension, was Arditi.

Arditi extends the metaphor beyond Freud's conception of the symptom as the 'return of the repressed'. He introduces the notion of the 'internal frontier', drawing on Freud's idea that the symptom is experienced as external to the ego while remaining internal to the subject – what Freud ([1933] 1964, 57) describes as an 'internal foreign territory'. Lacan's ([1969] 2006, 224, 249) previously mentioned neologism *extimité* captures this duality, combining exteriority and intimacy (Miller [1986] 2010, 13). For Arditi (2005, 89), populism emerges at the 'internal periphery' of democracy. It operates within democracy but does so in a way that challenges the system to fulfil its unaccomplished promises, potentially reinvigorating it.

To support his argument, Arditi (2005, 92) draws on Žižek's analysis of the symptom. For Žižek (1989, 18, 21), the symptom is not merely an element of the symbolic order but an exception that exposes its inconsistencies. It marks the failure or blind spots of the symbolic framework, challenging its universality and creating an aporetic moment where its exceptions reveal its limitations. Žižek interprets Lacan's (1966, 234; [1971] 2007, 164; [1975] 2002, 26, 101) frequently reiterated claim that Marx 'invented the symptom' to mean that the proletariat serves as capitalism's symptom. The proletariat, which ostensibly 'freely' sells its labour on the 'free' market, denounces the farse of a symbolic order premised on the ideal of 'freedom' (Marx [1867] 1996, 83–84).

Arditi (2005, 92) applies Žižek's framework to argue that populism is democracy's symptom. Populism, he suggests, embodies a form of radical democratic openness. It adheres to democratic procedures while simultaneously questioning – and even threatening – the closure of the democratic system. As he puts it:

> [One can depict] populism as the return of the repressed, as a symptom of democracy – as an internal element of the democratic system that also reveals the limits of the system and prevents its closure in the presumed normality of institutional procedures. (Arditi 2005, 88)

In a well-known passage, repeated by many scholars, Arditi (2005, 93) explains that 'populism plays the role of the awkward guest' – one who disregards social etiquette yet speaks painful truths to the other invitees. In this sense, the 'disruptive noise' of populism enacts the 'return of the repressed'.

For Arditi (2005, 91), the populist symptom consists of movements that highlight the unfulfilled promises of liberal democracy – sectors of society that claim the status of the 'people' and assert their rights. This notion is closely aligned with the idea of populism as aesthetic transgression. The symptom is that element which demands to be counted – the 'part of no-part' refusing subalternity and claiming inclusion (Biglieri 2005, 178). Moreover, in a particularly provocative passage, Arditi (2005, 91) argues that populism can even destabilise the very notion of the 'people' as a cohesive entity, calling into question the existence of a unified popular will. By invoking the 'people', populism as a symptom ultimately acknowledges that this entity has no fixed form, pointing instead to the radical contingency of its own identity. In doing so, it opens a space for an ethics of radical democracy.

Morbid symptoms

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the mainstream media has repeatedly referred to the Yellow Vests movement as a 'symptom'. This, of course, reflects a lay understanding of the concept. Yet it is striking that this interpretation stands in direct contrast to how Mouffe and Arditi deploy the notion. In media discourse, describing the Yellow Vests as a symptom was not a way of reclaiming the movement's radical democratic character but rather a means of pathologising it – suggesting that it was inadequate, unruly, violent. One could dismiss these accounts as politically motivated and theoretically weak. However, there is something to be learned from this framing – something that, I believe, is not necessarily incompatible with psychoanalysis.

Arditi's description of a 'people' questioning their own identity is inspiring. Yet, despite the redemptive potentialities he finds in populism, he acknowledges that not all expressions of populism are democratic. He counterbalances his analysis of populism as a symptom with reflections on its more troubling dimension – what he describes as democracy's unsavoury 'underside' (Arditi 2005, 91). In this, I entirely agree. However, unlike Arditi, I contend that this underside is not external to the metaphor of populism as a symptom but embedded within it.

Although Arditi's reading of Lacan follows a well-established interpretation, it appears incomplete. A more rigorous engagement with the psychoanalytic concept of the symptom suggests that populism as a symptom is not necessarily aligned with radical democracy. Instead, it may be closer to what Gramsci ([1930] 1996, Q3, §34) calls 'morbid symptoms' – phenomena such as the rise of lumpen or mob discourse, which emerge when a system enters crisis but no viable alternative has yet taken shape.

The first issue with Arditi's account is that he does not make clear that the *extime* status of the symptom derives from its opacity to the subject (Miller 1987, 114). In Freud's early work, the symptom's enigmatic status was seen as a precondition for it to emerge. To sustain itself as a compromise formation, its origins must remain in the dark and misunderstood.

This opacity arises precisely because the symptom is a substitutive representation – a by-product of repression (Freud [1915] 1957, 154). Repression takes place when the psychic energy associated with an anguish-provoking repressed traumatic image does not dissipate but instead becomes attached to a substitutive representation. It is this substitutive bonding that produces symptoms. For Freud, the analytical treatment consists in plunging into the unconscious mind, through a process of free association that could perhaps allow the subject to retrace the connection between the substitutive representation and the original one. Freud believes that the symptom can be dissolved through this process of revisiting the traumatic experience, and by discussing the repressive process – one's relation with the law, for example. It is with this paradigm in mind that Lacan ([1956] 2018, 24) would claim that the unconscious was structured as a language. He sees an equivalence between Freud's idea of symptomatic substitution with the linguistic concepts of metaphor. In this framework, Lacan ([1957] 1966, 528) says the symptom would work as a metaphor: it is a signifier that takes the place of an original. It provides a different name for something one cannot refer directly to.

The problem with this psychic metaphor – the symptom – is that it remains obscure to the subject. It does not prompt its own interpretation but persists precisely because interpretation is avoided. As a substitutive representation, a symptom never directly engages with the underlying issues (Freud [1917] 1963a, 358). It is not a resolution but a displacement. Despite Freud's ([1917] 1963b, 260) insistence that a psychoanalyst should not treat a symptomatic patient as a degenerate, he nevertheless describes symptoms as pathological. A symptom may signal that something is fundamentally amiss, yet its immediate meaning is, by definition, misleading. It indicates the presence of a 'hidden truth' but that truth remains concealed.

This dynamic becomes both more intricate and more revealing when one considers that symptoms are embedded within a fantasmatic framework. Since Freud ([1908] 1959, 159), fantasy and symptom have been understood as interlinked: fantasy structures and shapes the symptom. Lacan ([1967] 2001, 326) builds on this insight, emphasising that symptoms draw their force from the fantasies that sustain them. For both Freud and Lacan, the treatment of a symptom is ultimately inseparable from the task of identifying and engaging the fantasies that support it.

This understanding of fantasy's role in symptom formation reveals a fundamental problem in the argument that populism as a symptom is redemptive for democracy. It is difficult to see how something that is, by definition, misrecognised could be a force for democratic renewal. Arditi, in identifying the democratic potentialities of populism as a symptom, fails to fully account for the role of fantasy in shaping symptoms. Biglieri (2005, 170) moves beyond Arditi in recognising the importance of fantasy in populist symptoms, yet does not frame this as a problem. Both ultimately overlook the fact that while a symptom may express a truth about the subject's suffering, it remains alienating.

In political terms, even if populism signals latent problems within democracy, it may nevertheless be guided by fantasies in which the 'people' is imagined as a unified entity promising a reconciled society of full enjoyment. Rather than destabilising identities, as Arditi suggests, populism as a symptom may in fact reinforce them – tracing rigid boundaries between 'us' and an obscene, threatening 'other'.

The description of populism as a morbid symptom – a force that exposes democracy's shortcomings but remains fundamentally inadequate – appears even in analyses that do not engage with psychoanalysis. This critical perspective was inaugurated by Margaret Canovan (1999, 9–11), who frames populism as a paradoxical phenomenon: a force that seeks to redeem democracy while simultaneously posing a threat to it. Although populism can serve an inclusive function and deepen democratic participation, its 'corrective' role would be ultimately undermined by the very fantasies of 'thieves of enjoyment' that it mobilises – moralistically opposing a virtuous, homogeneous people to a corrupt elite. Thus, despite the nuances of this line of argument, in the end populist experiences remain 'pathological symptoms of some social disease' (Canovan 2004, 241).

Mouffe (2005, 55–56) herself would agree that far-right mob-like populism operates in precisely this way. She acknowledges that such movements may articulate 'legitimate democratic aspirations' (Mouffe 2018b, 68). As Monod (2019, 76) argues, they may even facilitate 'a return to politics for fringes of the population that might otherwise have turned away from it'. Yet by constructing scapegoats and appealing to 'essentialist identities of nationalist, religious or ethnic type' (Mouffe 2009, 552) they evade the actual sources of one's anguish – sources that, for Mouffe, include austerity policies and economic precarity but which also reflect an irreducible precariousness of every subject. In either case, the repressed returns in inadequate forms (Mouffe 2002, 13; 2020, 3). The 'return of the political' manifests through 'the growth of other forms of collective identification' (Mouffe 1999, 9), often led by fringe political actors who pose a direct challenge to the liberal democratic order itself.

Yellow symptoms

A critical assessment of the metaphor of populism as a symptom leads to a bleak evaluation of the Yellow Vests. In its strictly psychoanalytic sense, the metaphor aligns with the mainstream media discourse, which framed the movement as inherently undemocratic – morbid, even.[1] From this perspective, one is compelled to answer the central question of this book – whether the identities constructed by the Yellow Vests are compatible with radical democracy – with a negative.

To further explore the idea of populism as a morbid symptom and examine the relationship between symptom and fantasy in the Yellow Vests movement, I will conduct a document analysis of three key materials that circulated among its supporters. This will allow me to identify the fantasmatic elements structuring the movement's discourse – elements that reinforce its characterisation as undemocratic. Full reproductions or transcriptions of these sources can be found in the second appendix of this book. The first material to examine is Jacline Mouraud's viral video rant from October 2018, which played a crucial role in spreading the movement across France. I will then analyse two manifestos presented by Éric Drouet, Priscillia Ludosky and Maxime Nicolle between December 2018 and January 2019.

Before starting my document analysis, it is worth stressing that, in such a decentralised movement as the Yellow Vests, it is impossible to exhaust the fantasies appealing to the participants. Still, by focusing on some material produced by prominent figures of the movement I hope to indicate important discursive elements at the heart of the movement's ideology.

First document: a Facebook video rant

On 18 October 2018, Jacline Mouraud, a fifty-one-year-old musician and self-proclaimed occultist living in Brittany, uploaded a four-minute video to Facebook, denouncing what she saw as a systematic and unfair attack on car drivers by the government. The video quickly went viral. Within days, it had amassed more than six million views, adding fuel to what would soon become the Yellow Vests movement.

Mouraud's frustration had been building, but the immediate trigger for her rant was a government announcement that morning: new tolls would be

[1] Ietter (2023, 258–60) has claimed that Macron's anti-populism would be itself a morbid symptom. While this is an interesting idea, I think she neglects a possible morbid side in the movement that Ietter (2025, 1–2) herself describes as a symptom.

installed in the downtown areas of major cities to discourage car use. This, for her, was the final straw.

In her video, Mouraud voices her *colère* over several government policies. She criticises the stricter technical inspections introduced in May 2018, which she argues imposed costly and burdensome requirements – particularly for diesel car owners. She also denounces what she describes as a 'forest of speed cameras' spreading across the country. However, her most forceful criticism is reserved for the carbon tax. Mouraud insists that past governments had encouraged people to buy diesel cars, yet those same drivers were now being penalised and forced to pay more. A sense of betrayal is latent in the video: the people placed their trust in politicians, only to be the ones footing the bill for their choices.

Mouraud claims that the government is completely out of touch with the realities of ordinary people's lives. In her view, politicians are disconnected from those they are supposed to represent and therefore incapable of understanding their real concerns. This disconnect, she claims, is exacerbated by the influence of powerful lobbyists. While the government condemns pollution caused by cars, she notes, it remains silent about pollution from aeroplanes – a silence she attributes to pressure from the airline industry. As a solution, she proposes that politicians should regularly invite members of the public to voice their opinions on government policies. If they did, she claims, they would be in for a shock.

If the problem were merely one of disconnection – something that could, in principle, be remedied – then the solution might be straightforward. However, as the video progresses, it becomes clear that Mouraud sees deeper fractures in the relationship between the government and the people it is supposed to serve. The theme of betrayal runs throughout her speech, driven by her belief that, while ordinary people struggle, politicians lead lives of luxury – luxury funded by ever-increasing taxes imposed on the very people they disregard.

She first illustrates this idea by claiming that, while ordinary citizens are forced to pay ever-increasing taxes just to drive, politicians enjoy chauffeured rides in cars funded by the people. But her argument does not stop there. She insists that the government collects vast sums through taxes and asks bluntly: 'What are you doing with all the dough?' Her answer is laced with accusations of excess and indulgence. She paints a picture of politicians revelling in obscene enjoyment, claiming that tax money is squandered on replacing the Élysée Palace's tableware and building new swimming pools. For her, this is proof that everything must change – and that the government must fall.

She claims that at least 80% of the people agree with her, and that the people are 'sick and tired of their bullshit' (*on a plein les bottes de leur connerie*).

'Where is France going, *monsieur* Macron? Certainly not where you said you would take it', she concludes.

Second document: the Yellow Vests' Jeu de Paume *Oath*

On 13 December 2018, Yellow Vest spokespersons Priscilla Ludosky and Maxime Nicolle delivered a manifesto titled the '*Serment du Jeu de Paume*' in Versailles. This declaration came immediately after Macron's televised address, in which he sought to respond to the political crisis that had erupted nearly a month earlier.

The Yellow Vests' *Jeu de Paume* Oath is a particularly revealing document. Authored by key figures of the movement, it encapsulates the ideological stance that had taken shape after weeks of mass demonstrations. The text makes three references to *colère*, describing the French people as 'filled with *colère*' – a clear indication of how this affect was discursively mobilised within the movement. The manifesto states that this *colère* is not solely about economic concerns – what it refers to as the 'wallet' – but is also deeply tied to democratic grievances. In this sense, the document marks the transition from a protest centred on taxation to one that embraced explicit democratic demands, particularly the call for referendums.

The reference to the *Jeu de Paume* Oath appeals to one of the most famous episodes of the French Revolution: on 20 June 1789, the representatives of the Third Estate, having just established the first constituent assembly, swore not to disband until they had given France a constitution. Echoing this historical precedent, the Yellow Vests declared in their own 'oath' that they, too, would not disperse until their demands were met. Two main goals are stated: first, fiscal measures addressing their tax revolt; second, the introduction of instruments of direct democracy.

The manifesto asserts that these demands reflect the will of the French people. It also provides a relatively precise definition of this 'people'. After describing them as weary and '*en colère*', the text associates them with a series of: (1) occupations such as entrepreneurs, artisans, small shopkeepers, agricultural producers and workers, and (2) long-suffering groups such as nurses, people with disabilities, military personnel, teachers and so on – 'the list is too long to name them all', it states. Notably, the text invokes the notion of '*grandeur*' (greatness) in its depiction of the people. According to the 'oath', the people no longer believe in their own *grandeur*. However, this implies the existence of a latent *grandeur*, an unrealised potential within the simple French people.

While the people are portrayed as possessing a suppressed *grandeur*, the text asserts that their path to reclaiming it lies in regaining their freedom and

sovereignty. At present, it argues, they exercise no control over the country's destiny. The document illustrates this with a reference to the Lisbon Treaty – a topic with strong appeal among Eurosceptics – highlighting how the treaty's content was rejected in a referendum yet ultimately implemented through alternative means.

The 'oath' also seeks to counter criticisms of the Citizens' Initiative Referendum (RIC). It contends that reclaiming sovereignty through the RIC would not endanger the country. On the contrary, it insists that the people would make sound decisions, as they are neither unrealistic nor immoderate.

If the text, on one hand, defines the people and their unrealised *grandeur*, it also, on the other, designates their adversary. Who stands in opposition to the people's freedom and sovereignty? The political class. According to the manifesto, 'for forty years, president after president', politicians have betrayed the people. They are portrayed not as servants of the people but as opportunists who prioritise their own gain and that of the tiny economic elites to whom they are truly beholden. The text accuses them of having kidnapped the country, burdening the people with heavy taxation while allowing the super-rich to contribute nothing. In a nutshell, politicians and the elites are portrayed as 'thieves of enjoyment', living at the people's expense and preventing them from realising their *grandeur*.

'Where the hell is all this money going?', the text asks. According to the manifesto, the 'instinct and impertinent eyes' of the 'simple French citizens' recognise that their tax contributions fund politicians' privileges, their cronies, undeservedly high pensions and a bloated bureaucracy. The money pays for an aristocracy to live in luxury. This is not merely wasteful – it is an injustice. Their enjoyment is obscene and unearned. The text goes further, accusing Macron of upholding this injustice. It claims that this is precisely why he refuses to give voice to the people or listen to their demands.

A particularly striking passage compares government administration and taxation to a giant paw crushing the people. From this, the text claims that the people do not need the government – depicting it as an entity that merely takes what belongs to them while giving nothing in return. Moreover, the movement refuses any association with the image of beggars, of a people depending on the government. As the 'oath' says:

> [W]e do not want to live off your aid, we don't want to depend on a voracious [*boulimique*] state that has always taken more and more from us and given back less at each time. We want to be free! Free to enjoy [*jouir*] the product of our labour.

All they want is to break free, to regain liberty – and enjoy, as they say explicitly. Therefore, the proposed solution is tax reductions for basic essential products and the reduction of salaries, revenues and privileges of elected officials and high public employees enjoyed at the expense of the people.

Third document: an open letter to Emmanuel Macron

On 3 January 2019, Priscillia Ludosky and Éric Drouet published an open letter to President Macron, signed '*La France en colère*'. Their aim was to respond to his New Year's address. As shown earlier, Macron did not explicitly mention the Yellow Vests in his speech, but he had referred to the movement as a 'hate-filled mob' (*foule haineuse*) and questioned its legitimacy to speak in the name of the people – precisely by asking if such a thing as the 'people' actually exists.

In their open letter, the leading figures of the Yellow Vests interpret Macron's refusal to name the movement as further proof of his disdain, lack of recognition, and, above all, his elitism. They argue that Macron's scepticism about the existence of the people reflects his complete detachment from the poor. This assumption shapes the signatories' own conception of the people. In their response, they assert that the Yellow Vests embody the people precisely because they represent those from the 'lower strata' (*couches inférieures*), whom they claim Macron ignores. In their view, Macron and other politicians have 'turned their backs' on the people. The Yellow Vests portray this people as the lifeblood of France and their movement as a force for renewal – one that would finally give voice to citizens. These citizens are cast in virtuous terms: they are 'solidary' and 'peaceful', and their demands are presented as 'reasonable' and 'legitimate'.

While the 'people' are described in positive terms, Macron and his allies are portrayed as a 'caste', corrupted by lobbyists and insulated by privilege. Once again, the idea of an obscene enjoyment experienced by the powerful is latent in the whole text. The 'caste' is depicted as contemptuous, even mocking the underprivileged as 'beggars, toothless, those who have nothing'. The media are also included in this elite circle, accused of keeping the people in ignorance, reducing them to servitude and perpetuating the claim that there is no alternative but to dismantle public services.

The letter denounces police brutality and what its authors see as attacks on the right to protest. Twice, they warn that Macron's disdain will transform *colère* into hatred across France. His actions and words, they claim, are provocations – inciting revolt, civil war and class struggle. Yet, in a curious move, the letter *rejects* class struggle, calling instead for the country to be united and cohesive.

If Macron had questioned the movement's legitimacy, the letter systematically turns that critique against him. The authors describe Macron as egocentric, accusing him of betraying his promises to such an extent that the people no longer believe in him or trust his leadership. As a result, they dismiss his calls for dialogue and reiterate their demand for the RIC – the only way, in their view, that could restore sovereignty to the people. The RIC, they argue, would serve to lower taxes on essential goods and curb the privileges of elected officials and other state elites.

Yellow fantasies

Having summarised these three pieces of discourse, I now move beyond description to consider the fantasmatic elements within them. To do so, I follow Glynos (2011, 70, 79), who, in an insightful article, suggests that fantasies can be identified through an analysis of the 'guarantors' of a discourse.

In the case of the Yellow Vests, three fantasies are evident to varying degrees: the paternalistic fantasy, the self-sufficiency fantasy and the sovereignty fantasy. Glynos has previously described the first two, while the third has been widely recognised as a common feature of populist discourse.

The paternalistic fantasy emerges whenever the notion of betrayal is invoked. It pops up each time government officials are depicted as indulging in excessive enjoyment at the people's expense. This is not merely a case of theft of enjoyment, as previously discussed. Thieves of enjoyment do not necessarily betray – they may transgress, but the law they break does not bind them to a duty of protection. In contrast, the paternalistic fantasy implies a broken pact: the government was meant to safeguard the people. Condemnation of betrayal, in this sense, signals the rupture of an ideal – that elected officials ought to act as caretakers. Here, the guarantor is the idealised caring other. The claim that politicians have turned their backs on the people for forty years implies an ideal of a caretaker – of a government that listens to and responds to the people's needs.

As Glynos notes, paternalistic fantasies are typically aligned with demands to defend, improve and expand the welfare state. To some extent, this became increasingly true of the Yellow Vests. As I will explore in the next chapter, over time the movement gravitated towards the left. It is also worth revisiting the typology of invisibilisation outlined in the first chapter to highlight that the protesters were largely precarious workers. Among the poorest, in particular, there remains a living memory of France's strong welfare tradition – despite years of austerity and decline – alongside a clear demand for the protection of public services. However, in the discourses examined here, this tendency

towards defending the welfare state is counterbalanced by the presence of another fantasy: the self-sufficiency fantasy.

In self-sufficiency fantasies, the guarantor is the isolated subject. Instead of framing fortune or misfortune within a broader social context, these fantasies assign sole responsibility to the subject. The core idea is that ordinary people could thrive without government interference – that the state exists primarily to leech off the labour of hard-working men and women. In the French context, this fantasy resonates particularly with the declining lower middle class, for whom state support has lost relevance. Decades of liberalising reforms have eroded the effectiveness and universality of public policies, fostering a perception of the state as either absent or obstructive. For this group, the state is no longer a guarantor of social welfare but rather an obstacle to their aspirations (Zicman de Barros 2024a, 12–13, 23–24).

Among the Yellow Vests, the self-sufficiency fantasies manifest in claims such as 'we don't want to live on your aid', and in the rejection of the status of beggar or '*cassos*' – literally 'social case', a pejorative French term referring to outcasts or families that live on welfare. These fantasies appear to have been particularly strong in the early stages of the movement, suggesting ideological and political positions that diverged significantly from those associated with paternalistic fantasies. The defining feature of self-sufficiency fantasies is the belief that the people's problems could be solved by cutting taxes, shrinking the public sector and getting the state out of the way.

A third fantasy embedded in the Yellow Vests' discourse is what Biglieri (2005, 167–68, 209, 220–21) once described as a fantasy of immediacy – a vision of 'real' democracy beyond representation. I prefer to call this a fantasy of sovereignty, or, in the case of the Yellow Vests, a fantasy of the sovereign people. Here, the guarantor is this very 'people', acting as what Eklundh (2016, 131) terms the 'fantasmatic sovereign'. This figure is self-sufficient, though not in the sense of self-sufficiency fantasies but rather as an omnipotent entity capable of expressing itself immanently – for instance, through referendums. In fact, the Yellow Vests' demand for sovereignty is far from novel. Numerous scholars have noted that the idea of reclaiming sovereignty is central to populist discourse, particularly in its promise of redemption (Canovan 2004, 250–51; Arditi 2004, 136–40).

The limits of recognition and sovereignty

In their *Jeu de Paume* Oath, the Yellow Vests describe the people as 'dispossessed' and 'helpless'. To overcome this condition, they fantasise a sovereign people, fully in control of its identity and destiny. At first sight, their fantasy

seems like a call for political agency – a response to exclusion and powerlessness. Yet it deserves closer scrutiny. As discussed in Chapter 4, psychoanalysis views demands as ways of coping with anguish. The demand for sovereignty, however, is the demand for control par excellence. It promises certainty – about both the world and oneself – which is precisely why many theorists warn against it.

Arendt (1961, 165) argues that true freedom requires renouncing sovereignty. No subject is ever fully master of oneself – one is always vulnerable to interactions with others (Arendt [1958] 1998, 185, 190). For Arendt ([1954] 1994, 309), a genuine new beginning – one that truly challenges the given – depends on embracing radical contingency and recognising oneself as an ongoing open process of becoming. Butler (2004, 21; 2015b, 8; 2019, 26) develops a similar critique. Their concept of precariousness highlights the crisis of subjectivity, which must be acknowledged in any emancipatory project. The sovereign people fantasy, they argue, denies this condition, refusing to accept that one is always affected by others (Butler 1998, 285; 2015b, 8–9).

Unsurprisingly, the critique of sovereignty is closely linked to the critique of recognition. While the claim for recognition can be a means of incorporating excluded subaltern and precarious groups into the symbolic order and challenging structural domination (Butler 2015a, 209–10; 2001, 39), it is not necessarily emancipatory. Appeals to sovereignty and recognition can be narcissistic, blinding and often fuel resentment, reinforcing closed identities drawn around rigid boundaries. This produces stark divisions between 'us' and 'them', sometimes leading to outright hostility towards those deemed outsiders. The sovereign people is imagined as a unified, reconciled entity – an illusion evident in the Yellow Vests' rejection of class struggle in their open letter to Macron and in anti-immigrant mob-like incidents in Flixecourt and other xenophobic demands that appeared in the movement. Such fantasies echo Lefort's ([1983] 1986, 26–30) analysis of movements that believe eliminating the elite would remove social divisions. Rather than accepting division as constitutive, resentment externalises it, projecting lack onto an external enemy or thieves of enjoyment (Butler 2004, 29; Glynos 2011, 83–84).

Yet, as discussed in the previous chapter, the problem with sovereignty fantasies is not whether they reflect real grievances (Žižek 2000, 126–27). People do experience growing precarisation and perceive a world in disarray (Gerbaudo 2020, 43). It is also true that demands such as citizens' referendums may introduce democratic innovations. The issue lies in the fantasy that an almighty sovereign can serve as the ultimate guarantor of order. It surfaces in the Yellow Vests' self-idealisation as a modest, peaceful and hard-working people. It guides Drouet's call to invade the Élysée Palace – an

almost apocalyptic attempt to reclaim power. It fuels the belief that expelling Macron and other thieves of enjoyment will restore lost greatness. Ultimately, it appears whenever the people are invoked to mask the absence of a stable symbolic foundation.

This is where the metaphor of populism as a morbid symptom becomes useful. It provides a means of interpreting these fantasies, not merely as political grievances but as sustaining undemocratic discourses. Captured by these fantasies, the dynamics of desire take on a narcissistic dimension, as outlined at the end of Chapter 4. Rather than challenging the closure of the symbolic order, such mob-like populist movements risk reinforcing moralistic narratives that construct gated communities and rigid exclusions.

Furthermore, viewing populism as a morbid symptom has implications beyond so-called populist movements. It also shapes how one interprets theorists such as Laclau, who see populism as a strategic response to contemporary crises.

Symptomatically cynical

The idea that populism can be understood as a morbid symptom sheds light on certain aspects of the Yellow Vests movement, but it also carries several contentious implications. This metaphor inherently leans towards a negative interpretation of the movement, framing it as an expression of social pathology. Such a framing often bolsters anti-populist narcissistic fantasies, enabling mainstream commentators to externalise societal discontent onto the populist antagonist. The latter is portrayed as the root of all problems – the 'negative' empty signifier discussed in Chapter 3. This externalisation serves to shield post-democratic discourse from criticism, preserving its self-image while shifting accountability onto the unruly populist other.

Corroborating this point, the metaphor of populism as a morbid symptom also risks biasing empirical research. Viewing populist phenomena through this lens can obscure elements that do not conform to this interpretation. This risk is heightened when research relies solely on document analysis. While valuable for uncovering the fantasies embedded within discourses such as that of the Yellow Vests, such an approach often provides limited insight into participants' affective investments in these fantasies – and the ways in which they might transcend their literal content – ultimately reinforcing the presupposition that populism is inherently nefarious.

The metaphor also has broader repercussions for how to judge Laclau's work. It reinforces critiques of an ethical deficit in his framework, a point I explored in Chapter 2. This shift is evident in the evolving position of Arditi,

who transitioned from an initially enthusiastic stance on populism to a more critical and distanced perspective.

If populism is indeed viewed as a morbid symptom that reinforces closed identities, Laclau's defence of populism may appear not only ethically unsustainable but also cynically instrumental. Laclau is accused of using populism as a tool to captivate and fascinate the masses, advancing a specific political agenda through promises of plenitude he knows to be impossible. In psychoanalytic terms, this cynicism aligns with what Freud ([1927] 1961, 153–54) describes as perversion, marked by disavowal – the act of being fully aware of a truth while behaving as though unaware of it (Žižek 1989, 12). Arditi, for instance, argues that Laclau's defence of populism hinges on maintaining a cognitive asymmetry between himself and the people. While fully aware that 'there is no chance for a reconciled society actually materialising', Laclau nevertheless endorses the impossible promise of plenitude for the masses (Arditi 2010, 496).

Perhaps, like the young Bataille ([1935] 1970, 382), Laclau sought to appropriate the 'weapons of the adversary' as a mobilising tool, failing to see that in doing so he undermined the very radical democratic project he claimed to defend. One might go further and argue that Laclau ([1988] 1990, 196) inadvertently 'established him[self] as a member of a caste', engaging in what could be seen as 'a new "*trahison des clercs*"' – a betrayal of intellectuals, which he had once denounced. He would be one step away from reproducing what Arendt (1961, 17–18) criticises the most in intellectuals: their temptation to forge and rule a community from above. As Kojève ([1950] 2012, 259–62) observes, intellectuals seeking political influence have historically gravitated towards tyranny, either as advisers to tyrants or as tyrants themselves. Laclau would behave like the apostate leader of a religion described by Kojève ([1964] 1990, 11–12) – a leader who, even after abandoning faith, camouflaged this fact and continued to publicly hide it in order to sustain his rule.

Once again, however, this critique does not capture the full picture. In the next chapter, I will present findings from psychosocial interviews that challenge and expand upon the interpretations derived solely from document analysis – an approach that, as is often the case in critical fantasy studies, excels at identifying fantasies in manifestos and speeches but falls short of grasping how subjects actually relate to them. These interviews reveal complexities in the Yellow Vests movement that resist reduction to a single metaphor. Above all, I will argue that populism need not be confined to the metaphor of a morbid symptom. Drawing on the work of Laclau himself, I will explore how populism can also open up alternative modes of identification that are inclusive, emancipatory, and capable of reimagining collective belonging through a different destiny of the drive introduced by Freud: sublimation.

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6

The Yellow Vests as sublimation

> We should welcome everybody in the movement, you know. For me it doesn't matter whether you are Black or Arab, whether you are a man, a woman, or gay or something else. If you are a communist or if you vote to the right, or Macron, or if you don't vote. You see, someone told me: we don't want the layouts [*fainéants*], the mucky [*crasseux*], the parasites to be in the roundabout. I totally disagree! If you call the others this way, you are wrong.

The words came from Nicolas, a protester I met in my first stay in Jaunet, a man whose face bore the traces of long hours of labour as an artisan. He was forty-five, owned a small business and spoke with the fervour of someone who had thought deeply about the movement, about the people who gathered in the cold at the roundabout, drawn together by *colère* and an unfolding sense of change. His insistence on openness struck me. Some protesters had drawn boundaries, made distinctions about who belonged to the movement and who did not, but Nicolas pushed back against this. More than most of my interviewees, he articulated a vision of solidarity that resisted exclusion.

His statement challenges prevailing interpretations of the movement, inviting a perspective that looks beyond its moments of fracture and resentment, beyond the images of roadblocks and burning toll booths, and towards what was happening between people in those occupied spaces. There, under the yellow vests and against the glow of makeshift fires, new conversations were unfolding. The roundabout was not just a site of protest but, for some, a place of discovery.

Ulysse, a fifty-year-old trade unionist from a neighbouring town, echoed this sense of transformation. When I interviewed him on my first visit, he

described how the movement had opened his eyes to perspectives he had never encountered before. He was a veteran of demonstrations, accustomed to marches and slogans, but the Yellow Vests had been different:

> I've been to a lot of demonstrations in my life … It's normal for me. But what I like about the Yellow Vests is seeing different people. I've spoken to people I didn't know … It's taught me a lot. It's been different. It's been great!

His words suggest something often overlooked in accounts of the movement: that amid the anger and defiance something else was also at play – a porousness, a willingness to listen, to be unsettled by unfamiliar voices. These testimonies offer a counterpoint to the previous chapter, which examined the Yellow Vests through the lens of the symptom, emphasising the undemocratic fantasies structuring their discourses and the idealised, unconditional commitment they entailed. That approach, rooted in critical fantasy studies but based solely on document analysis, could not grasp how people actually relate to fantasy – something that psychosocial interviews are particularly well suited to assess. Here, however, another dynamic emerges: a multiplicity of identifications, an alternative way of imagining the 'people' – not as a homogenous bloc but as a shifting, contested space of encounters.

This shift in perspective also calls for a reconsideration of the psychoanalytic metaphors used to think about populism. If, in the previous chapter, the movement was read through the metaphor of the symptom – as an inherently inadequate, pathological return of the repressed – then Nicolas, Ulysse and others invite a different conceptual register. They point instead to another destiny of the drive – one that is far more promising and that, as Joel Birman (2013, 99) observes, intertwines politics, aesthetics and ethics. This is the concept that Laclau himself mobilises to think about populism: sublimation.

What is sublimation?

At the end of the previous chapter, Laclau found himself in dire straits. Is there a way to rescue his defence of populism from the criticism that frames it as a fantasmatic strategy? Continuing to follow Arditi's view of populism as a symptom would likely lead to a dead end. However, Laclau himself introduces another psychoanalytic metaphor for studying populism – sublimation. In his most famous work, he explicitly associates populism with sublimation, using it to synthesise many of the positions he had developed on hegemony over the years. As he states directly, the logic of populism is the same logic of sublimation (Laclau 2005, 116).

But what is sublimation? And can it operate beyond the logic of fantasy? As I will further argue in the concluding chapter, Laclau's use of sublimation is not without its difficulties, and once again my reading goes against the grain. Nevertheless, I contend that a precise application of this concept to the study of populism is highly valuable, as it supports the view that collective identities can, in fact, be compatible with a radical democratic ethics.

Sublimation is undoubtedly one of the least systematically defined concepts in psychoanalysis. Although Freud's work contains numerous references to the theme (Assoun 2017, 5), he never produced a metapsychological text dedicated to it. From what can be discerned, Freud ([1915] 1957a, 126) presents sublimation as, in some way, the counterpoint to the symptom – another possible destiny of the drive.

Whereas the symptom arises from the repression of the drive, sublimation is characterised by deviation. In sublimation, when confronted with the impossibility of satisfaction, the drive deviates from its aim. For Freud ([1933] 1964, 57), it meant the production of a new object for the drive. Sublimation is therefore a creative process (Birman 1999, 171). This is why it is frequently associated with artistic production.

The idea of deviation is key to understanding Lacan's theory of sublimation. It all begins with his reconceptualisation of the notion of drive. Lacan argues that the very idea of satisfying the drive through an object is untenable. As explained in Chapter 4, from its very inception – starting with the infant's encounter with the maternal breast – the drive does not attach itself to a stable object. Its satisfaction does not stem from the object itself, which remains variable and contingent. Instead, the drive pursues traces of the other, fragments of past experiences that persist over time, resurfacing repeatedly through an unrelenting force (Lacan [1955] 1966, 52; Fink 1995, 223–24).

Rather than seeking symbols integrated into meaning, the drive gravitates towards the material side of the signifier. Lacan ([1956] 2018, 207; [1957] 2021, 323) refers to this as the 'signifier in the real' – a dimension of language that exists outside structured meaning, appearing to the subject as enigmatic, unsettling and anguish-provoking (Safatle 2005, 297).[1] The satisfaction of the drive, therefore, comes from elsewhere. It lies in repetition, an incessant return

[1] This is why, as Lacan (1966, 848) asserts, every drive is a death drive. The notion of the death drive has been the subject of considerable debate, often associated with a 'blind fury' towards destruction or a 'will to power' (Freud [1915] 1957b, 279; [1924] 1961, 163). However, a more precise definition of the death drive points to something else: it is the unrelenting force emerging from within the subject, beyond conscious control, dispossessing and destabilising (Safatle 2012, 141–42). For this reason, the drive is also described as acephalous – beyond, or at the very limits of, meaning formations of the symbolic order.

towards nostalgic vanishing points, refusing to be arrested. As discussed in Chapter 4, satisfaction lies not in the food itself but in the mouth as an erogenous zone – '*le plaisir de la bouche*'.

As Lacan ([1964] 2014, 186) acknowledges, his comments on the drive generalise certain characteristics of sublimation, which he defines as being marked by deviation and as finding satisfaction in that deviation. In contrast, symptoms obscure this process within the metonymy of desire. Caught in fantasies, the subject desires empirical objects as if they could resolve the fundamental split within subjectivity, a misrecognition that leads to psychic suffering (Lacan [1964] 2014, 188). Sublimation, therefore, becomes the destiny of the drive par excellence – it fully embraces the drive's inherent deviation. To sublimate, in this sense, is to accept and make explicit the impossibility of satisfying the drive through empirical objects.

Despite their differences, sublimation is closely linked to the end of analysis (Birman 1997, 98). Freud himself already suggested this proximity, presenting sublimation at times as a welcomed outcome of treatment. Lacan radicalises this intuition: his notion of an end to analysis requires confronting the fact that no empirical object can satisfy desire. Instead, satisfaction stems from the drive itself, in a movement that remains diverted from its target, revolving around an impossible object. Žižek (2006, 7) summarises this process in general terms: 'the moment he [the subject] changes his attitude, starting to find pleasure in just repeating the failed task [to grab an object], squeezing the object which, again and again, eludes him, he shifts from desire to drive'.

This is not far from Lacan's ([1964] 2014, 213, 258) reflections on sublimation, which he characterises as a 'satisfaction from repetition', a process of 'reworking the lack in an infinite repetition'.

Before addressing the political implications of sublimation, it is worth noting that after his sixteenth seminar Lacan largely abandoned the discussion of sublimation. This shift in focus coincided with what many scholars interpret as a development in his concept of the symptom (Žižek 1989, 77). Rather than examining sublimation, Lacan ([1976] 2005, 136) increasingly turned his attention to what could be described as the 'real' dimension of the symptom – or, simply, the 'symptom as real' – a complex notion that became central to his later work. However, this transition does not render his earlier reflections on sublimatory processes obsolete. There remains a continuity between his discussion of sublimation and his later theorisation of the symptom as real.

To wrap it up, the symptom as real is closely related to what Freud describes as the drive component of the symptom, which emerges when the subject interprets symptoms and confronts fantasies (Freud [1926] 1959, 98). This could be called the 'navel' of the symptom – a fixed kernel of enjoyment.

It is what repeatedly resurfaces through the circulation of the drive and, like in sublimation, finds satisfaction in the very act of circling around its unattainable object.

This understanding of the symptom as real is likely what Arditi has in mind when he describes populism as a symptom of democracy. However, he overlooks a crucial point: one only encounters the symptom as real after traversing fantasy.

Collective sublimation

Having defined sublimation, two key questions arise. Can sublimation be a collective phenomenon? And can it be associated with populism?

At first glance, sublimation might seem like an exclusively subjective experience. However, since Freud, it has been understood as something that occurs beyond the analytic setting – indeed, this is often the case – and it has always carried a collective dimension. In his initial formulation, Freud ([1908] 1959, 187) suggested that sublimation involved the creation of socially valued objects. Although he later reworked this idea, its cultural and collective aspect remained central. For Lacan ([1960] 2019, 119), sublimation is above all a cultural phenomenon, one that has transformative effects on a community.

Even if sublimation operates at a collective level, can it be linked to populism? Authors such as Ostiguy and Marchart argue that it cannot. Ostiguy (1997, 6) explicitly associates sublimation with anti-populism. Following Freud's early interpretation, he links sublimation to a refined, 'high' culture, in opposition to populism's 'flaunting of the low'. In his view, sublimation involves some form of drive renunciation – suppression of libido, asceticism.[2] The problem with this perspective is that it conflates sublimation with repression. Although in a footnote Ostiguy (2009, 45n) briefly acknowledges the difference between these two destinies of the drive, his distinction remains excessively blurred. Similarly, Marchart (2019, 27) rejects the emancipatory potential of sublimation, portraying it as a mechanism that domesticates and neutralises antagonisms. In short, both authors assume that sublimation cannot be transgressive but instead serves to reinforce norms.

[2] It is both possible and necessary to interrogate the illusion that anti-populism somehow excludes passions (Moffitt 2019, 56; Eklundh 2020, 108). No discourse is devoid of affect, and anti-populist rhetoric, regardless of how it presents itself, inevitably involves affective investments – beginning with its very hostility towards 'populism'. Moreover, there are clear elective affinities between the seemingly 'disenchanted' realm of technical discourse and masochistic affects such as guilt (Stavrakakis 2012, 2303).

Laclau (2005, 115) and Mouffe (2013, 8) reject this approach, incorporating sublimation – though with varying degrees of conceptual precision – into their analyses of populism, particularly radical democratic populism. Their intervention marks a break in psychoanalytic political theory, challenging the prevailing pessimism about collective movements. By framing populism as a form of sublimation, they open up space for thinking about radically democratic masses. True to Freud's ([1933] 1964, 97) and Lacan's ([1960] 2019, 266) psychoanalytic formulations, they recognise that sublimation does not repress the drive through asceticism. Nor does it castrate conflict, which remains inherent to the subject and inevitably resurfaces in the public realm (Birman 2005, 218). As Mouffe (2013, 8) puts it, in radical democratic populism, antagonism is not eliminated but sublimated.

Building on this foundation, I argue that sublimation is not only a mechanism for channelling discontent but also a generator of aesthetic transgressions, which lie at the heart of populism. As I have argued, populism is not simply antagonistic. It is transgressive – and sublimation actively fosters populism's transgressive dimension, enabling troubling aesthetic practices that disrupt established norms and create new possibilities for radical democracy. Furthermore, this perspective adds nuance to the analysis of the Yellow Vests, suggesting that sublimatory practices may be at play within the movement.

Aesthetics of the real

One of the most remarkable aspects of the Yellow Vests movement was its critique of political representation, a hostility well-documented in academic analyses (Hayat 2022, 1040–41). This rejection was evident in their demand for the RIC and slogans like '*Élus, vous rendrez des comptes*' (Elected officials, you will be held accountable), prominently displayed in weekly marches. It also appeared in their 'almost obsessive' challenging of ephemeral leaders (Jeanpierre 2019, 43). At first glance, this stance might invoke the fantasy of an immanent people, or an immediate, indivisible expression of popular will. Yet another reading is possible: rather than seeking unmediated sovereignty, their critique may signal a deeper challenge to how political identity is constructed and stabilised.

Through this reading of the Yellow Vests, one encounters aesthetic practices that might be called sublimatory. If Chapter 2 examined aesthetic judgement and radical democratic aesthetics, it is now possible to understand that sublimation is the very destiny of the drive that produces this kind of aesthetic experience.

Sublimation has long been linked to aesthetic experience (Birman 2011, 63). Freud ([1933] 1964, 97) and Lacan ([1960] 2019, 187–88) describe it

as a process that generates a new object, a new form of symbolisation. Yet the symbols it produces differ fundamentally from those found in symptoms. Sublimatory objects are paradoxical: rather than sustaining fantasies, they disrupt them, revealing their own inadequacy and dismantling meaning (Birman 2019, 193–95; Safatle 2020, 81). Since sublimation is a mode for the expression of the drive, it compels the subject to confront what remains when these illusions are stripped away – the material side of the signifier, the unsettling, opaque leftovers that emerge once the veils of fantasy are disturbed (Safatle 2005, 290–98).

This dynamic is closely linked to the 'conflicting aesthetics' discussed in Chapter 2 – an aesthetic experience that unsettles identities, at the basis of a radical democratic experience. Freud ([1919] 1955, 219) characterises such aesthetics as 'uncanny', capturing the inexpressible *malaise* they produce (Freud [1914] 1955, 211). As Vladimir Safatle (2005, 269, 288) argues, this constitutes an 'aesthetics of the real'. The paradoxical objects of sublimation evoke this estrangement by pointing towards the 'real', something at the very limits of the symbolic order that resists full representation (Lacan [1960] 2019, 227). Rather than a conventional symbol, the sublime object is a 'representation that hosts the unrepresentable', evoking impossibility rather than fixed meaning (Stavrakakis 2011, 318).

Some of the symbols that emerged within the Yellow Vests movement functioned in precisely this way. Chapter 3 already introduced a few of their 'conflicting' aesthetic practices through the radical democratic interpretation of the concept of empty signifier. However, nowhere was this paradoxical aesthetic more striking than in the occupation of roundabouts across France.

The roundabout is a non-place. By occupying it, the Yellow Vests transformed it into a political place and literally created a spot where they could claim their right to appear. Of course, one could claim that this appearance of the invisibles was not emancipatory because it followed the dynamics of desire that reaffirm narcissistic, fetishised closed identities of a gated community. Similarly, one could suggest that this political place constructed by the Yellow Vests was saturated, leaving no room for internal contestation. While this might be the case on some occasions, I believe that in various occupations one is dealing with other, much more promising concrete aesthetic practices. I understand that, by occupying the roundabout, the movement transformed a non-place, a void, into an empty space.

With these examples, one starts to understand how to symbolise what resists symbolisation. The aim is not to represent the 'real' directly but to evoke it. Lacan illustrates this idea by drawing on Heidegger's reflections on ontology. Heidegger ([1949] 2012, 5–12) uses the example of a clay pot, emphasising

that its essence is not in the material itself but in the empty space within. It is this void – the capacity to hold and pour liquid – that defines its function. Lacan ([1960] 2019, 201) takes up this example to conceptualise a symbolic order similarly structured around emptiness – an emptiness that creates an open, non-saturated space.

The drive is drawn towards this emptiness, a fundamental lack that shapes the subject from the very beginning and constantly threatens to destabilise them. Sublimation offers a way to give form to this lack. This explains why Lacan ([1960] 2019, 190–91) frequently associates sublimation with emptiness – his examples often feature objects that highlight absence, such as an artwork composed of empty matchboxes, evoking the subject's fragmentation and incompleteness. Freud ([1910] 1957, 66–67) similarly observes that those who sublimate often leave their work incomplete, unfinished or at least perceive it as such.

Lefort has been a recurring reference throughout this book. In Chapter 3, I briefly highlighted his idea that, in democracy, the place of power remains empty, rejecting any ultimate authority and opening the space to contingency and indeterminacy (Lefort [1983] 1986, 27). Although Lefort largely avoids engaging with psychoanalysis in his political writings, this idea was evidently informed by Lacan's ([1966] 2001, 211; [1958] 1966, 736) reflections on sublimation and his notion of 'leaving empty' the function of certainty, building social bonds around a non-saturated symbolic space. This, in fact, marked the first attempt to translate this psychoanalytic insight into political thought.

Building on Chapter 3, it now becomes clear that sublimation deeply dialogues with Laclau's fifth use of the concept of empty signifier – the use that opens the path for radical democratic modes of identification. Despite the polysemy of the term and Laclau's sometimes imprecise deployment of psychoanalytic notions, his appeal to sublimation to explain the empty signifier's dynamics is insightful. This perspective demonstrates how a radical democratic people can be symbolically constructed through the invocation of its own impossibility – much like a clay pot shaped around an internal void (Stavrakakis 1999, 132). In Laclau's terms, radical democracy entails '*producing* emptiness out of the operation of hegemonic logics' (Laclau 2005, 166, emphasis in the original).

As discussed in Chapter 3, the identification process in emancipatory populism does not establish rigid boundaries between 'us' and 'them' but instead acknowledges their radical contingency. This approach enables the continuous reconfiguration of the political community, incorporating those previously excluded, subalternised.

Ethics of the real

'I don't know what's going to happen. In fact, we have never known. But things must change.' With these words, Annabelle, a fifty-year-old craftswoman and the first protester I interviewed in Jaunet, described her engagement in the Yellow Vests. Her statement was striking – not just in its urgency but in its embrace of uncertainty. She did not seek guarantees or clear resolutions. Rather, she was propelled by an unsettling force, a claim for transformation without the security of a predetermined outcome.

Annabelle's openness to the unknown is not merely a political disposition. It is an ethical stance – one that resonates with the ethics of radical democracy, an ethics I previously explored in Chapter 2. With the link between sublimation and radical democratic aesthetics already established in the previous section, this discussion can now be extended to examine how sublimation also plays a crucial role in radical democratic ethics – how it bridges an aesthetics of the real and an ethics of the real. In Chapter 2, I discussed how an ethics of psychoanalysis does not seek to resolve helplessness but instead engages with it as a constitutive element of subjectivity. I now claim that sublimation embodies this ethics.

Since Freud ([1923] 1955, 256), sublimation has been recognised as carrying an ethical dimension, a perspective that Lacan deepened in his seminar on ethics. Many authors have stressed the ethical status of the drive itself, which manifests in moments when the coherence of the subject falters. Rather than seeking to contain or neutralise the anguish these moments provoke, sublimation engages with them, transforming discontent into an openness to the unknown (Birman 2005, 210–11). Unlike idealisation and illusion, which mitigate anguish by offering stabilising fantasies, sublimation accepts helplessness as an unavoidable condition of subjectivity. It does not seek to mask this vulnerability but, to some extent, even incites it as a force of transformation.

This alternative relationship with anguish – what I have discussed as 'constituent anguish', an anguish that does not paralyse but rather compels transformation – might seem counter-intuitive. Yet my psychosocial interviews offer concrete illustrations of how this relationship operates. Annabelle's story, in particular, exemplifies how confronting helplessness can become a generative force rather than a debilitating burden.

She was not originally from Jaunet but had moved there recently as part of a profound shift in her life. Having married young, raised two children and spent years working as a secretary, she described her past life as ordinary – until a series of hardships upended it. The first was a cancer diagnosis, which, while treatable, left her physically and emotionally vulnerable. Contrary to her expectations, she found herself increasingly isolated, as her husband withdrew

from her during this period of frailty. The body that had once sustained their shared life now marked a distance between them, as if illness had rendered her unknowable to him. With children too young to provide support, she endured the long months of treatment largely alone. When remission came, so did abandonment. Eventually, he left, and she was left to confront not only the physical aftermath of illness but also a profound solitude.

Visibly moved as she recounted these experiences, her eyes welling up, Annabelle described how confronting death and the helplessness of abandonment had reshaped her outlook. Emerging from these trials, she resolved to radically change her life, even if she did not yet know how. She waited for her children to finish high school, remaining firm in her decision to start anew despite not knowing what lay ahead. Then, one evening, her daughter suggested she try a dating app. It seemed absurd at first, but something about the idea unsettled her in a way that felt necessary. She signed up.

It was there that she met a man she described as 'a nice guy'. Their connection was immediate, and on their first trip together they visited the Jaunet region. They fell in love with the place – the quiet streets, the open landscapes, the possibility of beginning again. Despite knowing no one there – or perhaps because of it – they decided to relocate and rebuild their lives. Within two years, Annabelle had changed husbands, moved to a new region and switched professions, becoming a craftswoman.

Her involvement in the Yellow Vests movement was another step in this trajectory of personal transformation. She had never participated in political demonstrations before. 'It was the first time I did something illegal', she told me, tears rolling down her face as she recalled the moment they defied police orders to disband. Yet her openness to uncertainty was evident in the way she engaged with the movement. She embraced the unknown, the undetermined and the possibility of political creativity. As she put it, 'I don't know where [the movement] is going to take us, but the way things are now must change'.

Annabelle embodies a different relationship with anguish – one that does not seek to escape but rather to embrace the unsettling force of the unknown. She exemplifies an ethics of sublimation, where anguish is not avoided or suppressed but confronted as a driving force for transformation. A radical democratic ethics in which one does not seek certainties but instead recognises one's own lack of sovereignty.

Another recognition, another sovereignty

If that last sentence felt like a play on words, it is because it was – and not by accident. Earlier chapters have established that the quest for recognition

was central to the Yellow Vests' mobilisation. I have also discussed how their movement was shaped by fantasies of sovereignty. The reflections above on sublimatory aesthetics and ethics may transform the way one interprets these facets of the movement.

In the cases of Nicolas, Ulysse and Annabelle, among others, dynamics of recognition and claims for sovereignty were clearly at play. However, the recognition they sought was not based on affirming a fixed, self-contained identity, but rather on an openness to the radically excluded. For them, the occupation should be a place where marginalised citizens from different backgrounds and positions could affect each other and engage together in a radical democratic open collective endeavour (see also Jeanpierre 2019, 105). Likewise, the sovereignty they claimed was not that of an autonomous subject but that of a 'people' whose identity remained constitutively in check, under construction. This resonates with an alternative, sublimatory understanding of recognition and sovereignty – one that distances itself from the idea of a sovereign subject striving for self-mastery and instead embraces dispossession and transformation.

Freud ([1923] 1955, 256) associates sublimation with social recognition – for instance, when he claims that sublimation produced socially valuable objects. Yet this does not imply the recognition of a sovereign subject with a fixed, independent identity. Instead, Birman (1997, 95–97) suggests that in sublimation recognition should be understood differently – not as the confirmation of a narcissistic, self-contained identity but as an acceptance of vulnerability, of being shaped by others. To recognise oneself, in this view, is to acknowledge non-sovereignty – or, at least, a sovereignty of a different kind.

Bataille was among the first to challenge conventional notions of recognition and sovereignty. His reflections on these themes emerged in dialogue with Kojève (1947, 646), whose reading of Hegel emphasised the subject's desire for recognition as a path to self-mastery. Bataille ([1937] 1997, 131–36; [1952] 1997, 441–43) rejects this idea, arguing that recognition does not affirm a coherent, self-contained identity. Instead, it acknowledges an unmasterable identity – one that is shaped and affected by others.

Bataille ([1954] 1976, 254) also overturns conventional understandings of sovereignty, asserting that 'sovereignty is nothing'. While sovereignty is something one is 'doomed to seek', it is not an idealised target (Bataille [1957] 2002, 143). The point is not to conceive sovereignty as a goal to be attained. Rather, true sovereignty does not rest on a unified subject who exercises decision-making power but on the ability to let oneself be affected by what escapes mastery, by the unmasterable (Bataille [1954] 1976, 252, 256).

Sovereignty, he argues, is not an attribute of the subject. 'One can never *be* sovereign', he claims (Bataille [1957] 2002, 144, emphasis in the original).

For Bataille ([1943] 1973, 15), true sovereignty is marked by experiences of loss, disorientation and excess. It involves a dissolution of the subject, blurring the boundary between subject and object (Bataille [1943] 1973, 21). Paradoxically, one experiences sovereignty precisely in moments of surrendering mastery. Bataille associated such moments with ecstasy, revolution and encounters with the illimitable. However, this experience is not one of closure or fulfilment but rather of radical openness – an openness to others.

This understanding of sovereignty and recognition recurs in the work of contemporary political theorists. Lefort (1983, 43–44), for instance, argues that radical democratic politics requires recognition – not of a stable, well-defined subject but of an unknown. Similarly, as discussed in Chapter 2, Laclau (2002, 384) understands the subject to be non-sovereign. On the contrary, he suggests that radical democratic sovereignty emerges precisely when the impertinent heterogeneity disrupts any attempt to constitute a closed sovereign subject. However, it is Butler and Safatle who have probably done the most to develop these reflections on an alternative theory of sovereignty and recognition.

For Butler (2001, 31), protest movements should reclaim sovereignty, not as self-rule in the traditional sense but through an acknowledgement of vulnerability – the realisation that one is 'constitutively limited' and 'opaque' to oneself. Rather than asserting mastery, this means encountering 'my own foreignness to myself' (Butler 2001, 33, 37). Safatle (2015, 321) develops a similar idea, arguing that recognition does not confirm a stable identity but exposes one to what cannot be fully possessed. He recalls that the drive is set in motion by others' material traits and is a force that unsettles the subject, revealing that one is never fully sovereign. In this sense, he follows Lacan ([1967] 2001, 252) in describing this process as 'subjective destitution' (Safatle 2017, 215–16). For both thinkers, recognising this dispossession is not simply about accepting limitation – it is also what allows for transformation, making space for new worlds to emerge.

Another, sublime enjoyment

If recognition and sovereignty can be rethought through a radical democratic lens, a crucial question remains: what sustains such political engagements over time? While Annabelle and others exemplify a recognition of non-sovereignty – an openness to dispossession and to what has been described as constituent anguish, a form of helplessness that compels action – there remains the question of whether such experiences of emancipatory *malaise* can endure.

In Chapter 1, I argued that enjoyment sustains discourses and that, without it, political engagements inevitably falter. This raises a crucial question: is there enjoyment in uncanniness and anguish? Can radical democracy, with its inherent indeterminacy, be something one can enjoy?

Certain readings of authors such as Miller (2003, 146–47) and Žižek (2004, 111–12) might lead to a pessimistic conclusion. They suggest that democracy is a desert of enjoyment, which accounts for its fragility. If enjoyment is understood as being guided by fantasy – the promise of full, self-contained enjoyment within a closed, harmonious society – then this critique holds. However, other forms of enjoyment emerge through sublimation.

For Lacan ([1964] 2014, 186), 'sublimation is nonetheless satisfaction of the drive, without repression'. In the later stages of his teaching, Lacan ([1973] 2016, 97; [1974] 2011, 31) identified an alternative, more promising mode of enjoyment, which he described in multiple ways. I refer to it as enjoyment of emptiness, or sublime enjoyment. This form of enjoyment is not driven by the impulse to complete or totalise (Glynos 2011, 83). Instead, it acknowledges that fantasmatic full enjoyment is an impossibility. Rather than seeking enjoyment in closure, it involves an openness to what is impossible – to that which resides at the margins and limits of the symbolic order that structures social life. This is an enjoyment grounded in the body's partial experiences of the drive. At the end of an analysis, a subject may come to value these bodily experiences in their irreducible partiality, learning to enjoy lack itself (Stavrakakis 2007, 279).

This does not imply that sublimation entails resignation or that sublime enjoyment is in any way limited or weak. On the contrary, it is the fantasy of full enjoyment that is inherently constrained, bound to frustration. Sublime enjoyment, by contrast, is an experience of 'absolute excess' (Žižek 2008, 331). Sublimation provides access to what Bataille ([1943] 1973, 10) calls 'a strange world where anguish and ecstasy entangle'. This is an enjoyment beyond language, an enjoyment of decentring, encountered only by embracing the unknown (Bataille [1943] 1973, 66).

On identity-building mechanisms

The question of whether enjoyment sustains sublimatory identification processes leads to another: can these sublimatory positions become hegemonic within a movement? It could be argued that the demonstrators mentioned were exceptions in the mobilisation. Still, while it remains difficult to determine the proportion of protesters aligned with an ethics of radical democracy, scholarship on the Yellow Vests largely agrees that, as the weeks passed, the

movement gravitated towards the left (Jeanpierre 2019, 80). This shift resulted from multiple factors, some of which were outlined in the introduction, particularly in relation to the movement's loss of momentum. As the mobilisation wore on, participation declined – not only among newcomers but also among far-right protesters, many of whom lacked the discipline and stamina to sustain long-term engagement. By contrast, left-leaning participants, often with a background in activism, proved more resilient in sustaining the protests and occupations over weeks and months.

Unsurprisingly, as briefly mentioned in Chapter 3, some of my more conservative interviewees – such as Louis and Emilia, introduced in Chapter 4 – lamented what they perceived as leftist infiltration and a loss of direction. Éva, a protester I interviewed in Paris during my preliminary fieldwork, expressed similar concerns. A seventy-year-old retiree, mother of three and consistent supporter of far-right parties, she told me: 'We have seen more and more red flags in the demonstrations. These flags have no place here. They are destroying an apolitical movement. They are trying to co-opt [*récupérer*] the movement.'

Of course, being left-wing and being radically democratic are not the same. Throughout history, factions identifying with the left have at times been just as willing as their adversaries to stifle critical thinking, leaving little room for genuine reflexivity or dissent. Returning to the case at hand, however, rather than a static coexistence in which some participants gained influence solely by virtue of endurance, it is necessary to examine how the aesthetic practices of the Yellow Vests established institutions that shaped subjective dispositions.

Talking about institutions established by the Yellow Vests might sound paradoxical. As discussed in Chapter 1, populism has an inherent anti-institutional dimension, challenging both formal and informal rules that govern social life. Yet, paradoxically, its transgressive force is also a force for institution-building (Zicman de Barros and Lago 2022, 21–22). The invocation of the 'people' or the mobilisation of charisma has historically laid the groundwork for new social arrangements. Populism does not merely construct identities. It also activates what some have called 'identity-building mechanisms' by establishing explicit and implicit rules – or institutions – that shape social dynamics (Zicman de Barros 2020, 522; 2021, 323).

In Chapter 1, I briefly examined identity-building mechanisms in relation to how digital social media reshaped gatekeeping processes, amplifying certain voices over others (Santos 2022, 79–80). However, a deeper exploration is needed to understand how other of such mechanisms functioned within the Yellow Vests movement itself.

At first glance, the Yellow Vests appeared to be a leaderless, horizontal movement and actively claimed this status. Yet, as with all self-proclaimed

horizontal movements and decentralised networks, this was only partially true. As discussed in the introduction, the movement had key figures at the national level. Power was also unevenly distributed at the local level, as it inevitably is. Hierarchies always find their way – not only emerging from identity-building mechanisms but also actively shaping, producing and reproducing them.

In occupied roundabouts, for example, those who were present more consistently – often because they were unemployed or retired – tended to be perceived as more legitimate, allowing them to exert influence over the movement's direction (Zicman de Barros 2020, 522). Informal mechanisms of exclusion also emerged, both at the grassroots and among more prominent figures. In a movement with fluid boundaries and no clear rules of belonging, verbal and even physical harassment were at times deployed to delineate who was and was not a Yellow Vest. Even procedural rules shaped power asymmetries and nudged the movement towards certain outcomes. A notorious example, evident in the Yellow Vests, is the rule of decision by consensus or quasi-consensus in assemblies or similar structures. A point that may at first escape the analyst is that the very decision to require consensus or overwhelming majorities fosters indecision – preserving the status quo and reinforcing the power of those who benefit from it.

Building horizontality

If identity-building mechanisms – with their 'vertical' dimension – seem worrisome at first, it may be disappointing to learn that they are unavoidable. Yet there is some reassurance: they are not inherently problematic. On the contrary, Laclau (2002, 382–84; 2015, 267) has argued that articulating a broad radical democratic movement always requires navigating the inherent tension between horizontality and verticality. As Le Bart (2020, 99) observes in his analysis of the Yellow Vests, movements fixated on horizontality often struggle to exert lasting political influence. Their contestation would remain 'contained' and therefore 'ephemeral' (Monod 2019, 80).

Moreover, not all identity-building mechanisms seek to saturate the symbolic order, leaving no room for indeterminacy. There are arrangements that foster openness. Sustaining an open and plural movement requires precisely a degree of verticality to protect it. The sustainability of horizontal movements depends on defining membership, boundaries and decision-making processes. As Lasse Thomassen and Marina Prentoulis (2014, 222) argue, without safeguards, horizontal movements remain vulnerable to co-optation by undemocratic forces. Although identity-building mechanisms can constrain a movement's field of action, they may also help sustain an open symbolic order.

In this sense, the sublimatory, radical democratic aesthetics discussed in this chapter – central to emancipatory populism – function as identity-building mechanisms. They are not merely counter-hegemonic but also give rise to paradoxical counter-hegemonic institutions, forming what could be called a paradoxical counter-hegemonic hegemony. Emancipatory populism requires an arrangement that fosters questioning, embraces doubt and confronts genuine uncertainty and radical indeterminacy. While institutional determinism does not exist, certain arrangements cultivate specific dispositions, encouraging critical distance.

The Yellow Vests movement, through its diverse organisational forms, provides examples of how different aesthetic arrangements shape subjective dispositions. Some arrangements did not foster openness – for instance, weekend marches in major cities. These ephemeral encounters left little space for meaningful interaction, as organised groups from across the country participated primarily to assert their presence in what could be described as a spectacular narcissistic 'aesthetics of conflict' – a dynamic Bucci (2016, 113, 134) critiques. Rather than seeking encounters with difference, many entered these processions already anticipating clashes with other factions within the 'inequivalent people' I previously discussed. The objective was not to engage with others but to reaffirm closed identities through confrontation, further entrenching factional divisions rather than fostering broader solidarities.

In contrast, roundabout occupations enabled deeper and more sustained interactions. As previously noted, roundabouts are inhospitable non-places within the road network, yet their political repurposing transformed them into crucial sites for social bonding and collective recognition. Their very structure demanded coordination, compelling participants to collaborate and take on collective responsibilities. A form of communal life emerged – marked by shared learning, mutual aid and the invention of new ways of living (Jeanpierre 2019, 109–10). In rural areas, where the movement was particularly active, farmers contributed produce, communal meals were prepared and cultural activities were organised.

Some roundabouts reinforced exclusionary identities, attracting protesters who preferred ideologically aligned spaces. Others, however, became sites of encounter, fostering dialogue and collective reflection. These occupations, by bringing together citizens from diverse backgrounds, cultivated new solidarities through sustained cooperation. Rather than imposing a fixed ideological meaning onto these spaces, they functioned as what I call sublimatory empty spaces – sites where certainties were unsettled, and collective bonds were forged. Assemblies frequently took place – not only to manage daily affairs but also to coordinate broader collective actions. To once again echo Laclau

(2005, 166), roundabout occupations, as a sublimatory aesthetic experience, acted as radical democratic identity-building mechanisms: they *produced* emptiness through the very operation of hegemonic logics.

For many Yellow Vests I interviewed, these spaces had a transformative effect – fostering an openness to the unknown. In numerous cases, roundabouts facilitated exchanges that strengthened solidarities across marginalised groups, shaping subjective dispositions like those observed in figures such as Nicolas, Ulysses and Annabelle. These configurations nurtured an open identity – one that embraced indeterminacy rather than retreating into rigid certainties.

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Conclusion: What can be learned from the Yellow Vests?

Gabriel, Isabelle, Louis, Emilia, Thierry, Juliette, Annabelle, Ulysse, Nicolas, Éva – each of them had a story to tell. In the south of France, in and around the town of Jaunet, I listened to their voices, and to the voices of many others. Through my psychosocial interviews, I encountered their anguishes and their *colères* as they shared their experiences of the Yellow Vests movement. Some stories were difficult to hear. Others echoed in unexpected ways. All of them left an imprint. For this, I am deeply grateful. Through their words, this book came to life – and, beyond illustrating a movement, they have helped expand the very field of critical fantasy studies.

Critical fantasy studies is an emerging field. Even as it continues to consolidate, its purpose is not to settle on a rigid theoretical framework to be applied to specific cases. Rather, as Laclau (1991, 1–3) suggests, the value of a case study – and arguably its only justification – lies in fostering a dynamic tension between empirical analysis and theory, a process that Glynos and Howarth (2007, 40, 204) describe as a retroductive cycle.

This book was written in that spirit, offering a contribution to critical fantasy studies through a dialogue between an empirical case – the Yellow Vests movement – and a body of theoretical work. The aim was to develop new ways of analysing collective identities in protest movements and their relation to radical democracy. My hope is that this endeavour has succeeded in demonstrating two key points: that populism, understood as aesthetic transgression, can foster multiple forms of identification – some aligned with radical democracy, others in direct opposition to it – and that these processes can coexist within the same movement.

Transgression and emancipation

To summarise this contribution, I will revisit the various stages of this work. The first part of the book was dedicated to understanding both populism and radical democracy, as well as their relationship, in order to acquire an analytical framework for thinking about emancipation.

As conceptualised here, populism and radical democracy exist in profound dialogue. Populism enters this work in the first chapter for two reasons. First, because it is an enigmatic term frequently attributed to the Yellow Vests, reflecting the movement's elusive, puzzling, ungraspable character. 'Populism' names something unsettling, uncanny – something that disturbs and resists comprehension. Second, because it offers a key to understanding the formation of collective identities and the emergence of new political subjects.

I argue that populism is, first and foremost, an aesthetic transgression (Zicman de Barros and Lago 2022, 92, 115; Zicman de Barros and Aiolfi 2025, 6). Aesthetics, following Rancière (2000, 27, 71–72), is not merely a surface embellishment or cosmetic layer – it is the very fabric of politics. Politics is fundamentally aesthetic because it is structured around the division between the visible and the invisible, the seen and the unseen. Populism, then, is aesthetically transgressive because it disrupts established norms regarding who and what can appear in the public sphere. It marks the shocking emergence of a 'real' at the margins of politics – the irruption of excluded groups into the public arena. The Yellow Vests were populist in this precise sense: they shocked; they disrupted the tacit norms of silencing. In a post-democratic context – where electoral competition does not provide genuine alternatives – and amid economic and subjective precarisation, they brought a self-proclaimed 'forgotten France' to the centre of public debate (Hayat 2019, 19; Fœssel 2019, 151).

When populism is understood as aesthetic transgression, its relationship with radical democracy may seem self-evident. At first glance, the very act of previously invisibilised groups entering the political space appears emancipatory, as it challenges hierarchies – both written and unwritten – that condemn certain subjects to silence. However, in Chapter 2, I complicated this assumption by showing, through moments within the Yellow Vests' own mobilisation, that stepping out of invisibility does not necessarily lead to emancipation. If populism is defined by aesthetic transgression, then judging whether a given moment of transgression is emancipatory requires fidelity to that transgressive impulse. Yet this is not the case for certain reactionary forces that had long been reproducing in the shadows. Their entry into the public sphere is indeed shocking – but, as Arendt ([1951] 1967, 107) and Marx ([1852] 1979, 149) would argue in their discussions of the mob or lumpen, such forces ultimately

seek not to challenge domination but to reaffirm it, setting in motion new forms of exclusion. This dynamic was visible at times within the Yellow Vests movement, when certain factions reproduced hostility towards foreigners and other marginalised groups.

An emancipatory populism, therefore, would require fidelity to transgression in a radical sense. A truly democratic populism entails an ethics that continually questions the boundaries that define the 'people' – an ethics that remains open to subalternised voices. The 'people' of emancipatory populism embodies what Marchart (2019, 23) describes as a 'conflicting aesthetics': a people constituted through aesthetic disruption, conscious of its own elusiveness and of the ongoing task of incorporating the invisible. This is a project that can never be fully realised, never totalised – yet its strength lies precisely in that openness.

Desire and beyond

The rest of this book sought to trace the line between emancipatory and reactionary populisms. Psychoanalysis had already informed the first part, particularly through references to the concept of the 'real' – that which can never be fully integrated into the symbolic order – and its implications for thinking about identity critique. However, psychoanalytic themes became central in the second part, which focused on the processes of identification within the Yellow Vests movement.

The third chapter examined the Yellow Vests' relationship with symbols, revisiting debates on the psychoanalytically informed concept of empty signifier. I demonstrated that different processes of identification coexist within the same movement, each shaping its trajectory in distinct ways.

Chapter 4 took this reflection further. Drawing on psychosocial interviews – particularly a paradigmatic conversation with a protester named Gabriel – I argued that the guiding force behind the Yellow Vests movement did not stem primarily from its demands.

Amid growing precarisation and social fragmentation, Gabriel – like many others – revealed that participation in the protests was motivated by something more fundamental: a desire to belong, to forge social bonds. It was also a desire to be seen, to capture the others' gaze (Bucci 2019, 100). Previously aloof participants described the movement as a 'family', forging connections for the first time in years (Jeanpierre 2019, 72). What is more, they rejoiced in the newfound attention, drawing the focus of television cameras and the government alike (Butler 2015, 92–93). The back of a yellow vest proclaimed: '*Soyons visibles!*'

Yet, as the book transitioned into its third part, it became evident that stepping out of invisibility does not automatically lead to emancipation. In some cases, the legitimate desire for recognition was not faithful to transgression. Instead, it risked solidifying into a narcissistic and exhibitionist 'aesthetic enjoyment' – a dynamic that Bucci (2016, 169; 2020, 64) critiques as reinforcing blinding the subject. Here, the quest for visibility risked becoming the affirmation of a closed identity, aligning with what Marchart (2019, 23) distinguishes as a scapegoating 'aesthetics of conflict' – an aesthetic experience that rigidly separates 'us' from 'them'.

The potentially blinding force of desire was evident in Gabriel's testimony. At one point, he told me he would 'do anything for the movement'. Finding in the Yellow Vests an answer to his longing for recognition, he seemed enthralled by the movement. Rather than prompting a self-reflective or critical engagement, his attachment became one of unconditional commitment – perhaps, as Freud suggests, even 'to the pitch of crime' (Freud [1921] 1955, 113).

The third and final part of the book analysed these distortions of desire – but also explored how they might be circumvented, using psychoanalytic metaphors that have been applied to populism. Chapter 5 examined these dynamics through the lens of populism as a symptom. In contrast to interpretations such as Ietter's (2025, 1–2), I argued that understanding the Yellow Vests as a symptom of a post-democratic condition – one in which real political alternatives are absent and dissenting voices are systematically repressed – is not a particularly productive approach. Framing populism as a symptom risks reducing it to what Gramsci ([1930] 1996, Q3, §34) describes as 'morbid symptoms': inadequate responses to post-democracy, more akin to mob or lumpen dynamics than to genuine radical democratic mobilisation.

The analysis of Yellow Vests documents in this chapter reinforced this reading. Through close examination, I identified key fantasies circulating within the movement – particularly the fantasy of a sovereign people. As I argued, such fantasies attempt to deny the vulnerability of political subjects, asserting sovereignty in a way that ultimately reinforces structures of domination. This is an experience of enjoyment-in-transgression involving a fantasy of limitless power, the belief in being able to do whatever one wants, whenever one wants (Glynos 2014, 181). In this case, undemocratic populism does not challenge totality – it attempts to constitute one. It succumbs to what Lefort ([1983] 1986, 30) warns against: 'the fantasy of the people-as-one, the beginnings of a quest for a substantial identity'. As Safatle (2015, 132–33) notes, this is the very opposite of what emancipatory movements aim to achieve – reactionary populism constructs an identity instead of subverting it.

Yet, as I pointed out at the end of Chapter 5, analysing documents alone does not fully reveal the movement's dynamics. Listing fantasies in discourse is easy – every discourse is full of fantasies. What matters is how subjects relate to these fantasies, a question best explored through psychosocial interviews. Chapter 6, therefore, opened new and more promising avenues for assessing the radical democratic potential of the Yellow Vests. Here, I returned to Laclau's (2005, 115) metaphor for populism: populism as an experience of sublimation.

Sublimation is deeply political. As Birman (2013, 99) argues, through sublimation the 'ontological inconsistency and the anguish that mark modernity' can appear 'in the realms of politics, aesthetics and ethics'. To understand how these three realms intersect in sublimation, it is worth considering that incompleteness haunts the concept in two senses. First, Freud's formulations on sublimation remain incomplete – never fully articulated. Second, Freud ([1910] 1957b, 66–67) links sublimation to the very notion of incompleteness, unconclusion – a path further developed by Lacan, who associates sublimation with emptiness and with the acceptance of a fundamental lack within the symbolic order.

In various contexts, I argue, the Yellow Vests' occupation of roundabouts enacted precisely this kind of empty space – a space of encounter and exchange that resisted saturation. I hope this reflection has made clear the connection between sublimation and radical democracy. Sublimation is, in essence, the psychoanalytic term for the 'conflicting aesthetics' of radical democracy – a disposition that embraces openness and resists closure. The roundabout, in this sense, nudged protesters towards new modes of identification, towards an emancipatory form of populism.

The impurity of sublimation

By the end of Chapter 6, having contrasted different aspects of the Yellow Vests movement, I hope to have demarcated with some clarity the distinction between different populist phenomena. My goal was never to argue that either symptom or sublimation is the most adequate metaphor for understanding populism. Rather, I aim to highlight their complementarity. The boundary between symptom – understood as a return of the repressed, entrenching the subject within unresolved contradictions – and sublimation, which involves a deviation of the drive that generates new symbolic formations, delineates the divide between undemocratic and radical democratic forms of populism. It also marks the difference between a rigid 'aesthetics of conflict' and a 'conflicting aesthetics' that embraces uncertainty – between the entry of subaltern groups

into politics through an open reference to the 'people' and the entry of reactionary sectors in search of a closed identity, unfaithful to aesthetic transgression.

Over the years, I have further explored this distinction through parallels with other psychoanalytic categories. Building on Birman's clue (1997, 94), I have examined how this differentiation operates in relation to the subject's engagement with the object. From this perspective, I have contrasted sublimation with idealisation – the latter being a key mechanism in symptom formation, where the object is elevated to an unattainable status, reinforcing rigid identifications (Zicman de Barros 2019, 98–104). In contrast, sublimation reconfigures the subject's relationship with the object by embracing its incompleteness and radical contingency.

Similarly, I have framed this distinction through the opposition between desire and drive (Zicman de Barros 2020, 517–19). While desire sustains a fantasy of wholeness, tethering the subject to an fantasmatic fulfilment, the drive, by contrast, operates through repetition and fragmentation, destituting the subject rather than stabilising their identification. Drive unsettles rather than grounds, pushing beyond symbolic certainties and exposing the subject to a constitutive lack. These inquiries have culminated in the following comparative framework:

Table C.1 Comparative table of populist identification

Kind of populism	Undemocratic	Radical democratic
Destiny of the drive	Symptom	Sublimation
Relationship with object	Idealisation	Sublimation
Subjective dynamic	Desire	Drive

Source: Zicman de Barros 2022, 230.

I believe that this distinction was not always clear for scholars in critical populism studies. The difficulty of separating these categories underpins some of the controversies surrounding Arditi's (2005, 92) and Biglieri's (2005, 178) accounts of populism as a symptom. A similar conceptual blurring appears in Laclau's discussion of populism as sublimation. While Laclau (2008, 183; 2005, 119) explicitly acknowledges the distinction between desire and drive, at times he seems to disavow it, describing the object of sublimation in terms characteristic of desire and idealisation – 'the embodiment of a mythical fullness' or as having a 'totalising effect' (Laclau 2005, 115, 234). These ambiguities help contextualise some of the accusations of cynicism levelled against him.

It is crucial to critically assess how Arditi, Biglieri and Laclau incorporate psychoanalytic concepts. Yet their slippages are, to some extent, understandable.

My psychosocial interviews underscore the importance of differentiating between various modes of identification, but things might be blurrier. As suggested in Chapter 6, the Yellow Vests were marked by various modes of identification coexisting around the same symbols such as the 'people' – or even the high-visibility vest. The very fact that the roundabout fostered radical democratic identities suggests that these boundaries remain porous.

Some argue that the word 'populism' is problematic, since it risks creating false symmetries by grouping together emancipatory and reactionary endeavours under the same label (Zicman de Barros and Lago 2022, 11–18). Yet, as the Yellow Vests demonstrate, political mobilisation does not follow fixed dispositions – it unfolds in grey zones, where distinctions are not always clear-cut. The roundabout itself became a site of transformation, where dispositions remained open and fluid. As Glynos (2011b, 386) emphasises, beyond analysing different modes of ethical engagement, it is key to examine the conditions that enable transitions between them – including the possibility of a grey zone in these shifts. These transitional processes reveal the complexities of populism.

This tension between symptom and sublimation finds further articulation in psychoanalysis. Freud ([1908] 1959, 161; [1909] 1955, 203; [1917] 1963, 375–76) repeatedly contrasts the two concepts. Yet the boundary between them remains fluid. He acknowledged that sublimation has its limits – not all drives can be sublimated. Some are inevitably repressed, rechannelled into desiring fantasies, and later re-emerge as symptoms (Freud [1910] 1957a, 54).

This ambiguity extends to the distinction between idealisation and sublimation. Since Freud ([1914] 1957, 94; [1921] 1955, 113), the latter has always been on the brink of dissolving into the former. Lacan's work further complicates this picture, showing how desire and the drive are deeply entangled. While he initially described sublimatory objects as referring to emptiness, he later suggests (Lacan [1964] 2014, 188; [1960] 2019, 191) that any object can become an object of sublimation. This means that the same object can either be idealised within desire – reinforcing symptom formations – or sublimated through the drive.

In this discussion, it is also important to recall that 'fantasies are ineliminable' (Glynos 2011a, 73). Sublimation does not simply erase the fantasies that shape symptoms. Instead, it transforms the subject's relationship with them (Lacan [1976] 2005, 136). In this sense, the distinction between symptom and sublimation appears as ultimately ethical. In symptom formations, identity is fixed and fantasy serves as a defence against anguish. In sublimation, fantasy is questioned and the subject learns to confront the helplessness this process produces.

Yet, especially in collective contexts, nothing can totally prevent the subject from falling from one position to another. Figures like those discussed in

Chapter 6, such as Nicolas, Ulysse and Annabelle, exemplify a shift towards a more open, radical democratic ethics. Their engagement with the movement was marked by a willingness to embrace heterogeneity and challenge rigid boundaries. However, as the movement evolved, others might have reinforced exclusionary forms of identification, rejecting difference rather than integrating it.

As I commented in Chapter 2, Bataille ([1958] 1976, 461) at one point in his life flirted with reactionary movements precisely because of their mobilising force. If this was a short-sighted mistake, it nonetheless illustrates how distinctions can sometimes be blurred. The roundabout thus became a site of both sublimation – where political drives were redirected towards open-ended radical democratic engagement – and symptom formation, where exclusionary tendencies could reassert themselves. While it fostered exchange, it also risked saturation by those seeking to impose closure. Ultimately, ambiguities prevailed. Distinguishing between different populisms is not always straightforward, as a grey area will always exist between an undemocratic, moralistic stance and an ethics of radical democracy.

This blurred frontier introduces a degree of instability into the very idea of a sublimatory radical democratic populism, which remains perpetually vulnerable to regressing into the dynamics of desire, fantasy and morbid symptoms. Yet this instability is not a flaw but a constitutive feature of the paradoxical endeavour of radical democracy. The impurity of politics – a reality that sublimation should lay bare – also underscores the impurity of sublimation itself. The radical democratic potential of populism remains perpetually entangled with fantasy, emerging only in precarious, ever-contested forms.

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Appendix 1: Prominent figures among the Yellow Vests

The Yellow Vests were frequently described as a leaderless movement, marked by an almost obsessive rejection of emerging leaders. Those who gained too much prominence were systematically pushed aside. Yet, as explored in Chapter 6 when discussing identity-building mechanisms at the movement's grassroots, power is never evenly distributed. From its base to its more visible figures, certain actors shaped its direction from the outset. This appendix examines the dynamics of the movement's informal national leadership – a leadership that remained fragmented, frequently contested, yet never entirely absent.

Two key figures were Priscillia Ludosky, who launched the online petition that sparked the movement, and Éric Drouet, who orchestrated the first blockade of the Parisian ring road and played a central role in organising street demonstrations. As discussed in the introduction, both rose to prominence through media exposure – mainstream media as much as digital social media. It was television and newspapers that amplified Ludosky's petition and brought Drouet into the public eye. However, they were far from the only prominent figures boosted by the media. The movement's porous structure allowed the media to assume a kingmaking role, elevating certain figures and, in some cases, manufacturing leadership. Some who were not even active in the protests were suddenly portrayed as spokespersons simply because they were willing to wear a yellow vest and appear on camera. In the first weeks of mobilisation, dozens of protesters appeared on major news channels, speaking in the name of the movement.

The mainstream media's influence on the Yellow Vests movement became particularly evident on 25 November 2018, when Éric Drouet and Priscillia Ludosky organised an online meeting of thirty people under the banner of a

self-proclaimed 'national coordination', briefly mentioned in Chapter 3. The gathering sought to define the movement's demands and decide whether – and how – the Yellow Vests should engage with the government. Notably, participation in this coordination was based on prominence: selection criteria explicitly included both media visibility and involvement in street actions. While the convenors aimed to curb the proliferation of self-appointed and unauthorised spokespersons in TV studios, the communiqué issued the following day still listed being 'known in the media' (*connu dans les médias*) alongside 'actions on the ground' (*actions sur le terrain*) as key qualifications for attendance.[1]

The meeting resulted in the formation of an eight-person delegation tasked with facilitating dialogue with the authorities.[2] However, although the communiqué insisted that 'no split of any kind is underway' (*aucune scission de quelque nature est en cours*) within the movement, internal disagreements swiftly escalated, leading to the delegation's dissolution that very same day. Despite this setback, Drouet and Ludosky met with government representatives on 27 November in an attempt at negotiation – one that ultimately failed. This encounter proved a turning point. Many within the movement became increasingly sceptical of institutional engagement, and deepening divisions gave rise to two distinct factions.

On 28 November 2018, Drouet and other prominent figures took part in a national debate with government ministers and parliamentarians broadcast on television. Despite sitting side by side and voicing their shared opposition to Macron's administration on air, divisions among these informal leaders only deepened. Personal tensions and, more significantly, ideological rifts fuelled ongoing disputes over the movement's meaning and direction. One faction rejected institutionalisation, opposed seeking authorisation for demonstrations and refused any dialogue with the government. The other argued that the movement should extend beyond street mobilisation, engage with authorities and even consider participating in elections.

Drouet and, to a large extent, Ludosky formed the core of the anti-institutionalist sector. Alongside figures such as Maxime Nicolle and Jérôme Rodrigues, they positioned themselves as the '*canal historique*' or 'original

[1] 'Création d'une délégation de communicants et rencontre avec le Président de la République, le Premier ministre et son gouvernement'. 2018. *Facebook*, 26 November 2018, https://tinyurl.com/yellow-vests-20181126.

[2] This short-lived eight-person delegation, formed within the so-called 'national coordination', included Éric Drouet and Priscillia Ludosky, along with Maxime Nicolle (Côtes-d'Armor), Mathieu Blavier (Bouches-du-Rhône), Jason Herbert (Charente), Thomas Miralles (Pyrénées-Orientales), Marine Charrette-Labadie (Corrèze), and Julien Terrier (Haute-Garonne).

branch' of the movement. Nicolle, also known as Fly Rider, was a thirty-one-year-old unemployed chauffeur from Côtes-d'Armor. As mentioned in Chapter 5, he was present at the reading of the Yellow Vests' *Jeu de Paume* Oath on 13 December 2018. However, by then, he had already gained significant visibility. His involvement in the movement began on 31 October 2018, when he created a Facebook group to share information about the blockades organised by the Yellow Vests. Initially, the group remained small, but his prominence surged after he and three other protesters staged a low-key demonstration outside a TV studio, leading to an invitation to speak on a national broadcast on 20 November 2018. Shortly after that, he participated in the 'national coordination' meeting and was chosen as part of the short-lived eight-person delegation. Although the delegation quickly dissolved, he became closely associated with Drouet and Ludosky and appeared alongside Drouet in the televised national debate on 28 November.

Rodrigues, a thirty-nine-year-old merchant from Seine-Saint-Denis, gained visibility by live-streaming demonstrations. His description of the movement as 'the family', discussed in Chapter 4, resonated widely. By mid-December, he was regularly invited onto news channels and became even more emblematic after nearly losing an eye when he was injured by a rubber bullet on 26 January 2019. However, the 'original branch' was not free of internal tensions. On 14 January 2019, Ludosky publicly distanced herself from Drouet after a dispute over the movement's direction.

The institutionalist sector, in contrast, coalesced around another prominent figure: Jacline Mouraud, the fifty-one-year-old musician and occultist from Brittany, also mentioned in Chapter 5. Even before Ludosky and Drouet gained media prominence, Mouraud had already gone viral with her video of 18 October 2018, in which she criticised the government. From 26 October onwards, she became a regular presence in the mainstream media, appearing in political debates, engaging in negotiations with elected officials, and ultimately taking part in the televised national debate with government representatives on 28 November.

Mouraud was joined by figures such as Benjamin Cauchy, a thirty-eight-year-old tradesman who appointed himself spokesperson for the Occitanie region. His media presence was significant but controversial owing to his past involvement in student unions and local government, and his links to far-right circles. Another key figure was Christophe Chalençon, a fifty-two-year-old blacksmith from Provence. He emerged as a Yellow Vests spokesperson after appearing on the nightly television news on 18 November 2018. His rhetoric was strongly reactionary, advocating for the dissolution of the National Assembly and the establishment of a government led by a former

general. Despite these positions, he had previously run for office and supported electoral participation.

The rift between these two core groups emerged early. During the national coordination meeting on 25 November, Drouet attempted to expel members of Mouraud's circle, accusing them of pursuing hidden political agendas. He also blocked Cauchy's inclusion in the eight-person delegation. Ironically, this came despite Drouet's repeated rejection of any leadership role – after all, the movement's communiqué insisted that prominent figures were not 'decision-makers' but merely 'messengers'. And yet, despite the frequent insistence that the Yellow Vests 'belong to no one and to everyone', this was neither the first nor the last time Drouet sought to push certain people out or to draw lines between 'good' and 'bad' Yellow Vests.

In response, Mouraud's faction publicly challenged Drouet and Ludosky's legitimacy to speak for the movement, contributing to the delegation's collapse. On 1 December 2018, Mouraud and her supporters announced the creation of the 'Free Yellow Vests' (*Gilets jaunes libres*), accusing Drouet and Ludosky of being too radical and left-leaning – though this claim was largely unfounded. Their manifesto argued that weekly demonstrations alone were insufficient and that the movement needed an institutional strategy, including direct negotiations with the government.[3]

Like the 'original branch', however, the 'Free Yellow Vests' were far from unified. Tensions quickly emerged over how to institutionalise the movement. Only four days after a delegation from the group met with the French prime minister on 7 December 2018, internal divisions became evident. On 11 December, Chalençon, described as both charismatic and rude, left the core group. He argued that the movement should take a more confrontational stance towards the government, using street protests to apply pressure. By the end of the month, he had convinced Ingrid Levavasseur to join his efforts to form an electoral movement for the upcoming European elections. This alliance, however, proved short-lived, and within weeks they too had parted ways.

Levavasseur, a thirty-one-year-old care worker from Normandy and mother of two – mentioned in a footnote in Chapter 2 – rose to prominence in the movement largely by chance, but also with the support of mainstream media. An early protester, she was on her way to an occupied roundabout when a punctured tyre forced her to stop at a toll station on 25 November 2018. By coincidence, another group of Yellow Vests arrived to carry out a 'free toll

[3] 'Nous voulons être les porte-parole d'une colère constructive'. 2018. *Le Journal du Dimanche*, 1 December 2018.

operation', and a TV crew covering their actions interviewed her. A few days later, she was invited for a studio interview, followed by an appearance in the televised national debate on 28 November. She then became the central figure in a special TV report on 23 December 2018 that focused on women within the Yellow Vests movement, making her one of its most recognisable faces.

Her growing visibility, however, made her a divisive figure. Controversy arose when she briefly accepted an offer to become a commentator for one of France's major cable news channels, a move met with hostility by some Yellow Vests. A similar backlash followed when she aligned with Chalençon to explore an electoral path. On 18 February 2019, she was expelled from a demonstration and accused of betraying the movement by advocating for institutionalisation. Facing intense criticism, she abandoned the idea of transforming the Yellow Vests into an electoral force.

The attacks on Levavasseur illustrate how divisions among the movement's leaders had repercussions at its base. All prominent figures within the Yellow Vests reported receiving online threats from rival factions, and some were openly harassed during demonstrations.

In this account, another figure worth mentioning is François Boulo, a thirty-two-year-old lawyer from Normandy, chosen to represent the Yellow Vests in his town. From January 2019, he became increasingly visible in mainstream media. His case is particularly notable because of his collaboration with communications expert Sébastien Lelièvre, who had also offered his services to Levavasseur. She later accused Lelièvre of favouring Boulo over her. Despite this tension and his relatively late emergence in the movement, Boulo gained popularity among Yellow Vests for his composed and articulate speech. By late January, Drouet publicly expressed full confidence in him. Although Drouet had long resisted the idea of a formal representative for the movement, by the end of March he suggested Boulo take on this role to defend the movement against media attacks. However, both Boulo and Fly Rider ultimately convinced him to drop the proposal.

To conclude, a different initiative aimed at structuring the movement also deserves mention: the so-called 'Assembly of Assemblies' (*Assemblée des assemblées*). Launched by Yellow Vests from Commercy in Lorraine, this initiative sought to unite protesters from across the country. However, its impact remained limited. Many Yellow Vests – if not the majority – ignored the initiative, which was largely dominated by experienced left-wing activists. Still, the 'Assembly of Assemblies' represents another attempt to shape the movement's direction and define its meaning.

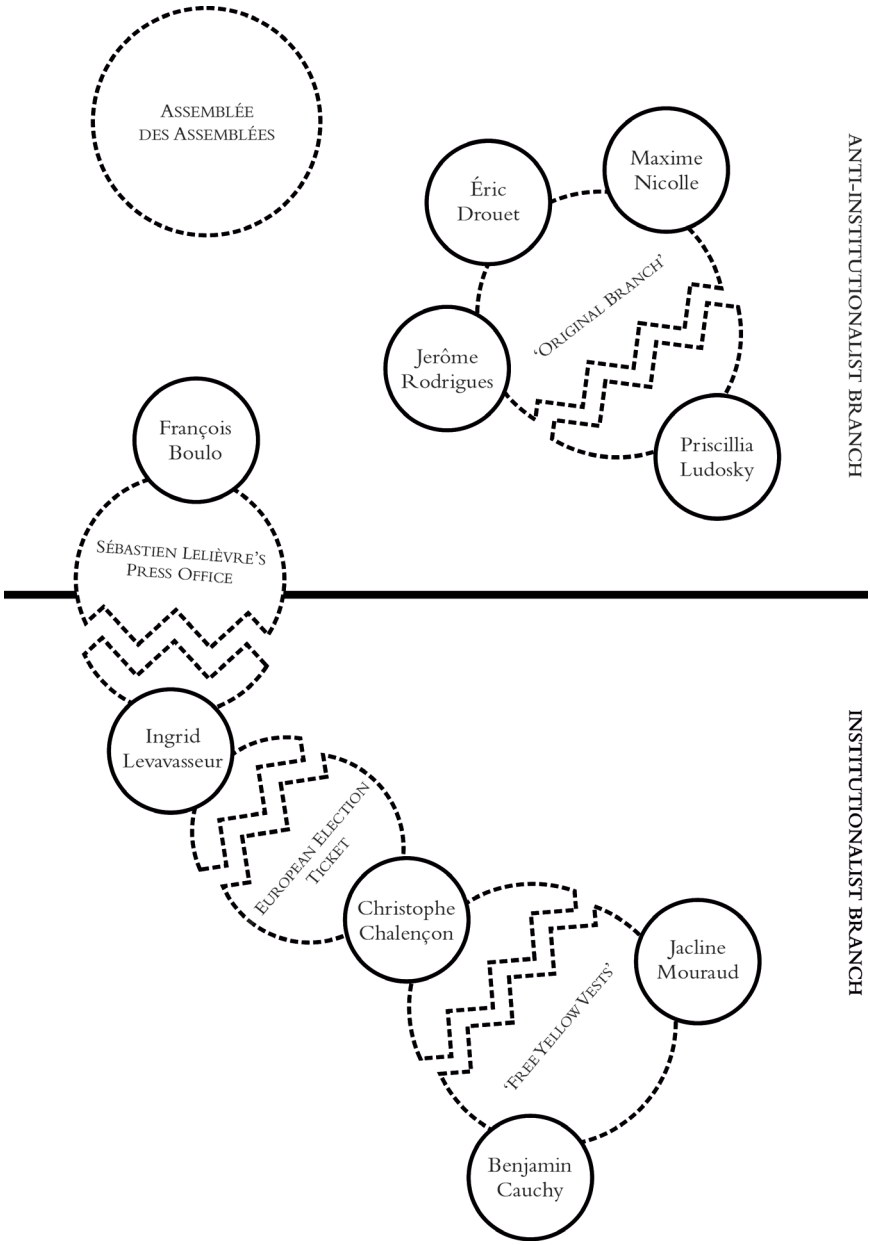

Figure A1.1 Key figures of the movement.

Appendix 2: Key documents

First document: Transcript of Jacline Mouraud's Facebook video

18 October 2018[1]

Hello everyone, so I'm making this video to have a bit of a rant [*coup de gueule*]. I have a couple of words to say to *monsieur* Macron and his government. When is this going to end? The crackdown on drivers that you have put in place since you came to power, huh? Because now it's reaching new heights. I've made a little list of what we've been subjected to since you arrived, and we've had enough [*on en a plein les bottes*], it's clear.

The new MOT tests [*contrôles techniques*] – half the cars don't pass anymore, but you don't care. You drive around in a fleet of cars that's provided for you and paid for by us, huh? The rise in fuel prices – €1.50 per litre, but no one cares, no one says anything. Why does no one say anything? Because we can't afford to take to the streets, because we have to pay the taxes you so kindly sent us at the end of the year, huh? So how long is this going to last?

Next, the crackdown on diesel vehicles. Still going on, huh? Because you made us all buy diesel cars, claiming they were supposedly less polluting at one point. It wasn't you, but we don't care, you're the one in charge today. And now, all of a sudden, our diesel cars are a problem, so we have to replace them. Well, I don't have the money to buy a new car, huh? And your little pitiful grants won't be enough to replace the entire French car fleet.

Then, there's the increase in the number of speed cameras. Now, they're everywhere. France is covered in a forest of speed cameras, huh? But what are

[1] Mouraud, Jacline. 2018. 'Où va la France?' *Facebook*, 18 October 2018, https://tinyurl.com/yellow-vests-20181018.

you doing with all the money, that's the real question? That's what everyone is wondering. In Paris, the number of fines issued went from 12,000 to 87,000 in just one year. But what are you doing with all the dough? Apart from changing the crockery at the Élysée Palace or building yourselves swimming pools? We have to wonder, huh? If that's what the money is being used for, then maybe we need a change, because there's no point in keeping you around just to make a mess of things [*faire des conneries*].

And now, unmarked police cars [*voitures privées banalisées*]. That's another one. Where is this going? We are being hounded everywhere. The moment we get into our cars, we are treated like walking fines waiting to happen. Between filling up with fuel and paying fines, because now if you go even a tiny bit over the limit, bang – fine. But you wouldn't know about that, would you? Because you don't get fines – you drive cars that are provided for you, huh? No problem for you, no fines to pay.

And now today, it's tolls at the entrance to major cities. Where do you think you are? Do you really think French people can still afford to pay tolls just to enter big cities? So what will we do? We simply won't go into the cities anymore. The city centres will become deserted [*désertification du centre-ville*]. That's it, and since people aren't shopping in supermarkets anymore either because they only sell rubbish [*de la merde*], we'll just order everything online. *Voilà*. That way, the carbon footprint will probably be even higher. But do you ever stop to think about the nonsense you're coming up with [*les conneries que vous faites*]?

And today, we've reached a new peak of absurdity – number plates [*carte grise*] for bicycles. Because you don't know where to get money from anymore, so you come up with bicycle registration. All to make us believe that when they're stolen, they'll be easier to recover. But honestly, who cares if a €200 bike gets stolen? If it's worth more, it's insured anyway. The truth is, you just don't know where to squeeze more money from. But what are you doing with the French people's money?

I'd love it if [the journalist Jean-Jacques] Bourdin or someone on [the increasingly far-right news channel] CNews, with all due respect, would invite a member of the public on their programme once a week – just once a week. Someone who could say exactly what they think of the policies being imposed on us. Because I think there would be some big surprises. And I'm certain that at least 80% of the people listening to me right now agree with what I'm saying.

So, either I invite you to share this video to tell them that we're sick and tired of their bullshit [*on en a plein les bottes de leurs conneries*], huh? Or, in that case, go ahead and make your own videos to say you've had enough. Because

this relentless crackdown on motorists – it's too much. Not everyone lives in the city. I drive 25,000 km a year, so I have no choice but to use my car, whether it pollutes or not. And while we're on the subject of pollution, shall we talk about aeroplane emissions, which you never mention, of course? Oh yes, because there are powerful lobbies behind that. Of course.

But honestly, where is this country headed? Where is France going, *monsieur* Macron? Where is France going? Certainly not where you said you would take it.

Second document: The Yellow Vests' *Jeu de Paume* Oath

13 December 2018[2]

Ladies and gentlemen of the press, thank you for being here.

We are addressing this speech to the entire French people as well as to President Emmanuel Macron.

It has now been nearly a month since the popular movement of the Yellow Vests has shaken France. This movement belongs to no one and to everyone. It is the expression of a people who, for forty years, have seen themselves stripped of everything that once allowed them to believe in their future and their greatness [*grandeur*]. For forty years, president after president, election after election, betrayals, lies, and abandonment have followed one another. Yes, *monsieur* President, we are exhausted. Yes, we are filled with *colère*. And yes, we have no other means to make ourselves heard than by humbly wearing this now-famous yellow vest.

We are exhausted by a colossal tax burden that drains our country, our entrepreneurs, our artisans, our small shopkeepers, our creators, and our workers of all energy, while a small elite continuously escapes taxation. Mandatory deductions now represent 46% of GDP, and social assistance accounts for a third of annual GDP. Yet despite this, you still cannot even decently pay nurses, people with disabilities, military personnel, teachers, and many others – the list is too long to name them all.

So we have a question: where the hell is all this money going [*où diable va tout cet argent*]? Our instinct and impertinent eyes as simple French citizens can see it clearly. This money is being spent on unjustified privileges, cronyism, commissions, lifelong pensions and countless servants. Elected officials, the servants of the French people, are using their power to turn themselves into

[2] 'Serment du jeu de paume des Gilets jaunes'. 2018. *Facebook*, 13 December 2018, https://tinyurl.com/yellow-vests-20181213.

aristocrats of public money. Meanwhile, we, the French people, are sinking into economic distress. We no longer accept this situation.

We also tell you this: we do not want to live off your aid, we don't want to depend on a voracious [*boulimique*] state that has always taken more and more from us and given back less at each time. We want to live free! Free to enjoy [*jouir*] the product of our labour, free to create and innovate without the oppressive hand of the Administration and the Tax Office crushing us, free to pay reasonable taxes to help our fellow citizens in difficulty, free to have access to housing and a dignified life.

Therefore, we, the Yellow Vests, demand a serious reduction in all taxes and levies on essential goods (energy, housing, transport, food, clothing, etc.) as well as a significant reduction in all salaries, privileges, pensions – both current and future – of elected officials and high-ranking civil servants.

But our *colère* is not just about our wallet, however empty it may be. Our *colère* runs deeper. It stems from the fact that for decades, we, the French people, have had no real control over the direction of our country. We have not forgotten the Lisbon Treaty, adopted after being rejected in the 2005 referendum. We have not forgotten the 13 years that have passed since without a single referendum. We have not forgotten the promises that were never fulfilled. We forget nothing.

Monsieur President, you said you could 'feel the democratic *malaise* in the country'. And it is true – it exists. But what do you propose to resolve it? Nothing. Because we know that nothing would be more inconvenient for you than to give the people the means to make their voices heard.

We are tired of having to beg for the crumbs of democracy that you and your elected officials are willing to grant us. We are therefore coming to you with a concrete demand to resolve this democratic crisis: submit to the French people, via referendum, a constitutional amendment to introduce the Citizens' Initiative Referendum (*Référendum d'initiative citoyenne* – RIC) in all areas.

This text must be based on four key points:

- Granting the people the right to trigger a referendum to amend the Constitution, and prohibiting any constitutional change without a referendum;
- Granting the people the right to draft or repeal a law on any subject they choose;
- Granting the people the right to request a referendum on any law passed by Parliament;
- Requiring the President of the Republic to submit all treaties, agreements, and international pacts to a referendum before ratification.

This text, which we have drafted, has no other objective than to restore to the people their role as sovereigns. It does not seek to endanger the Republic or destabilise the State, nor is it unrealistic or excessive. We have no other ambition than to resolve this immense crisis of sovereignty. Give us back control of our destiny – submit this text to the French people, for the decision is theirs alone to make.

Before this very Salle du *Jeu de Paume*, where on 20 June 1789 the deputies of France's first constituent assembly swore an oath not to disband before giving France a Constitution, we take the oath not to disband until the people are granted a referendum on the RIC, the rollback of state privileges, and the reduction of mandatory levies.

We are pacifists, and we will remain so – but know this: not even bayonets will make us take off our yellow vests. They are our last garment, and we refuse to stand naked before our children.

Monsieur President of the Republic, you have said you want to resolve France's democratic *malaise*. Then hear this demand from the people: give us back our freedom and our sovereignty.

Thank you.

Third document: Open Letter to Emmanuel Macron

3 January 2019[3]

Monsieur President of the French Republic, you addressed the sovereign people of France on Monday, 31 December 2018, at 8:00 pm to express your New Year's wishes to all citizens.

We, the people of France, citizens of this beautiful and valiant country, citizens of *La France en colère*, take due note of your statements and wish to respond.

Yes, *monsieur* Macron, as you stated in your speech on Monday, 10 December 2018, you have 'at times' hurt your fellow citizens with your words and the orders given to the police forces. Yes, you hurt us with your words, and you physically harm the people by using weapons of war against peaceful citizen demonstrations. The repression that you are waging without restraint against all whistle-blowers and citizens of this country is a declaration of war that is continually renewed.

[3] 'Lettre ouverte citoyenne en réponse aux allocutions télévisées de Monsieur Emmanuel Macron'. 2019. *Facebook*, 3 January 2019, https://tinyurl.com/yellow-vests-20190103.

Your law enforcement forces are savagely attacking the people, as well as journalists, 'Street Medics', and all citizens exercising their right to protest freely and peacefully. Your armed forces defend the personal interests of your upper social class.

And now, in your New Year's address, you denounce excesses, overflows? Are you not undoubtedly referring to the abuses of your law enforcement against the citizens?

Monsieur Macron, you accuse a few 'spokespersons of a hate-filled mob [*portes voix d'une foule haineuse*] of attacking elected officials, the police, journalists, foreigners, Jews, homosexuals'. You accuse them without naming them. Yes, *monsieur* Macron, you are indeed speaking of the Yellow Vests of France and their initiators.

And, the height of irony, you even ask in whose name these whistle-blowers are addressing you, and we quote: 'Speaking in the name of the people, but which people? From where? How? [*Parler au nom du peuple mais lequel? D'où? Comment?*]'.

You seem utterly lost and in a panic, *monsieur* President… Do you not recognise any people at all? But of which Nation, then, have you been elected?

Are you so far above all this, so far removed from the lower strata [*couches inférieures*]? We denounce your false and slanderous accusations.

Monsieur President, this movement that you refuse to recognise, whether you like it or not, is expanding and strengthening as your fellow citizens are beaten, gassed, kept in open-air confinement for hours, in an incredible disregard for citizens' rights.

So, as we hear you scold us and accuse us of all evils, perhaps it is time for the citizens of France who have adopted this yellow vest as a sign of protest to remove it and appear in the streets and squares as the simple citizens they are – without Yellow Vests, unarmed, facing grenades and batons. Let's see if you will continue to beat the children, young, elderly, women, and men of France…

No, *monsieur* Macron, you are mistaken. We do not stand for the negation of France but for the hope of a new France, one that listens more to those who are its lifeblood.

What are we to think of this state of law [*état de droit*] that does not respect even its own fundamental principles when our elected officials turn their backs, as you have done for weeks, on the people whose identity and origins you seem not to comprehend?

We understand well that you persist in your decisions to dismantle public services. The citizens of France in remote villages have taken note.

'*A colère* has erupted that has long been brewing.' You are undoubtedly the trigger for a France on high alert and on the brink, a reflection of the image you project.

You hope for democratic trust [*une confiance démocratique*] in the transparency of the media, yet you personally exploit all the media arsenal that members of your elite class place at your disposal to subjugate and keep the people in ignorance and narrow-mindedness.

You wish for 'listening, dialogue, humility', yet you believe that we are deluded when we do not listen to the elite imposing upon us a universal and unquestionable singular way of thinking [*la pensée unique universelle et sans controverse*]?

Monsieur Emmanuel Macron, your actions and words have clearly discredited you and are highly condemnable in view of human rights [*les droits de l'homme*], a fundamental value in which the citizens of France are deeply rooted.

Yes, *monsieur* Macron, the citizens of France are solidary and live out solidarity daily at protest rallying sites. The citizens are peaceful and have been asking for reasonable and immediately applicable measures for weeks. You do not respond, and you let things drag on, proposing false solutions – half-measures that the people of France reject. When will you understand that you and your allies are no longer credible, that you have lost the trust of those who once believed in you and your movement 19 months ago?

Monsieur Emmanuel Macron, do you take even a moment to realise that your statements before the entire French people are genuine calls for civil revolt, even civil war for those who have nothing left?

Do you understand that you are calling for a true class struggle [*une véritable lutte des classes*] that is detrimental to the unity and cohesion of France? What are we to think of the new measures being applied from today to job seekers? Are you satisfied with your schedule?

Do you realise that in every one of your speeches, you insult the intelligence of the citizens of France?

Do you realise that you prove at every moment that you are far removed from the reality of the lives of the French?

You believe in a Republican order [*un ordre républicain*] to consolidate your power and the servitude of the French people?

Do you truly think that calling for the State's utmost firmness in the face of the people's legitimate claims is the right solution?

What infuriates the citizens, *monsieur* Macron, is injustice. Injustice experienced by the mobilised citizens for nearly two months across the entire national territory, including the islands and distant territories, which hear nothing from you but mass manipulation and lies.

You are right, *monsieur* Macron – today, injustice and your contempt will transform *colère* into hatred throughout the national territory.

We demand justice for our injured and dead, direct or collateral victims. We demand justice for our claims [*Nous demandons justice pour nos revendications*]. We demand the establishment of truly independent media that will fairly represent our mobilisations and suffering in the face of the repressive and media tools you have put in place to silence us.

You see, where a few days ago some people staged a mock court where they beheaded a mannequin representing a personality rejected by the people, while those people apparently complied with the law by duly declaring a demonstration on the public highway, your forces of repression have descended on these citizens who today find themselves in a worse situation than ever. Do you really think that this masquerade deserves such a judicial rampage against them? Have you advised the chancellery of a wrath necessary for the sake of example? Perhaps they will be the first political prisoners of your mandate?

Why do you consider it necessary to place preventively in custody thousands of citizens who are converging on Paris, capital of the free world and of human rights [*droits de l'homme*], with the sole aim of showing their peaceful disapproval of your policy?

What will happen next? Will you continue to restrict freedoms to the point of arresting a few people who are walking through the streets of your capital city carrying candles or who simply want to have a bite to eat with friends?

Will we now have to declare in advance to the prefecture a birthday party for a few friends who want to go out on the town? Would you also have the people shot with live ammunition as an example?

Do them all justice and listen to their appeal instead of destroying them and silencing them by all means available to your powerful office.

Stop your provocations against the people of France and really listen to them!

We will spare you the need to shed a few polite tears during your speeches, as the people of France no longer trust you.

Colère will turn to hatred if you continue, from your pedestal, to consider the little people as beggars, toothless, those who have nothing.

What happened to your campaign promises? What happened to your fine words of unity when you wanted to reach the top?

We, the citizens of France, Yellow Vests or not, make a solemn request of you today. Change your attitude and welcome us around a table to discuss.

We are wary of the implementation of your national consultation plan. We consider it a political trap to try to drown out a subject that terrifies you: to give back sovereignty to the people of France by implementing the Citizens'

Initiative Referendum in all matters, but also by implementing a significant reduction in all taxes on essential goods, and finally, a significant reduction in all current and future pensions, salaries, privileges and annuities of elected officials and state officials.

So find a respectable person who has not been the subject of legal investigations, who has not been politicised in any way, who has not been the subject of controversy and who is beyond reproach and not corrupted by the financial system, and we can begin discussions with this person about the recovery of the sovereignty of the people of France.

President Macron, listen to the people of France now, and perhaps we will be inclined to build tomorrow's France [*la France de demain*] with you. Do not think yourself above the law and the will of the people of France.

You will write to us in a few days to share *your* expectations?

This one sentence is enough to confirm that you do not understand the legitimate expectations of the French people, as you shift from their rightful demands to your own egotistical concerns.

Yes, we agree: 'one cannot build anything on lies and self-interest'.

Well, who are these great powers if not your friends? Who are those who allow themselves to be bought by pro-glyphosate lobbies or oil companies that pollute with total complacency and with your blessing the territories and peoples they enslave?

Stop openly mocking citizens who genuinely care about the environment and let them take part in the big climate march on 27 January without coming and polluting the event with a march in support of your personal greatness.

And no, despite your efforts, we are not resigned. In fact, we are uniting, we can do better, and we will do better. And, yes, we will go further.

La France en colère

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