



## Yellow vests and European democracy

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There are few occasions where progressive, revolutionary action can be mistaken for conservative narrow-mindedness. About two years ago (vol. 18, issue 4) I wondered if ‘refusal (or even plate-smashing) should be a sociological category’. The referendum on Brexit was a clear sign that the relation among social categories had changed. The lower classes would now refuse to cooperate even to what might be in their interest, so long as the powerful strata would continue to plan things without taking them into account. This is in many cases a new level of political reflexivity that most of us mistook for an obtuse reactionary attitude.

The yellow vest protest in France raised the question again. The entire range of possible accusations has been launched against them: fascists or anarchists, secret instruments of political parties, apolitical, clueless red-necks or sophisticated haters. Nothing sticks, however, since they openly and unreservedly admit their plurality. So, what keeps them together? – I asked amidst teargas clouds and police incursions. Very simply, experience. Experience of not being able to make ends meet when they feel that they do all they can to avoid being dependent on others, including the state and its welfare benefits, which they see as humiliating handouts.

Ideological positions, party political views, trade union activity and other structures of aggregation seem increasingly irrelevant to them. They can share their experience online and bond on an individual basis with millions of peers without paying the price of adhering to an ideology or an organisation. This is the contribution of the Internet, plurality does not hamper aggregation, individuality does not hamper coordination. For, yellow vests do not ‘belong’ to Facebook or Twitter as they would to a political party or a trade union. As they put it, they are ‘all or no one’ and they do not wish to have representatives and leaders if they can avoid it, despite the suffocating pressure that all institutions put upon them to enter the established game.

Their claims are remarkably pragmatic, yet they move at light speed from the price of petrol, to the breakup of large banks and to direct


democracy, without the slightest hesitation or incoherence. In their world, politics is before everything else a method of maintaining social dignity for everyone and the economy a means to that political end. They do not applaud ambition but they tolerate it, they do not reject power but they wish to see it on a leash held by ‘the people’.

In the last decade, the European lower classes seem to increasingly realise that ‘elites’ are less needed in the political process. And, if one looks at the overwhelming passive support to the yellow vests from the other classes in France, it seems that the will to change the political organisation of European societies spreads. This development is to be welcomed in many aspects, most particularly as a claim for the renewal of current representative regimes that become increasingly irrelevant and do not qualify as legitimate democracies in the conscience of their citizens. This is not to say that citizens in general, and the yellow vests in particular, do not acknowledge the necessity of governance. Quite to the contrary, they sense that a new form of democracy is both possible and necessary in order to make governance efficient for those who are side-lined by the ‘system’ and *wish at the same time to count as individuals*.

This issue touches upon a series of the underlying causes leading to such claims. *Steenvoorden & Wright* explore the intricacies of the relation between society and political institutions and the recourse to limited identities in order to better face uncertainty. A careful reading of their article cannot but convince us that sociopolitical life in Europe has been seeking new forms under the pressure of a fragile, individual link to the future, which offers fierce competition and no guaranties. *Natili, Jessoula, Madama & Matsaganis* show that the tactics of party politics continues to provide the basis of income policies for the lower strata at a time when the radical right advances and approaches of another order are urgently needed. *Kennedy et al.* explain how inert and durable our excluding tendencies are, despite the formidable progress that has been achieved in some domains of social life. Europe is not changing when it comes to the Roma who still remain invisible, even in times of strong demands for change. *Morris* convincingly argues that playing with fire can probably burn one in politics too. Party political discourses seeking to represent a ‘tough on EU’ attitude contributed to Brexit and to the demise of those who castigated freedom of movement and welfare measures for migrants. *Cantalini & Panichella* deal with another European fear, the demographics of migration. They find what is natural. People carry in them their sociocultural values and align themselves to procreation patterns according to their conditions. Inclusion brings alignment. *Filandri &*

*Struffolino* focus on poverty for people who work across Europe. Their findings perfectly anticipate the demands of the yellow vests for increased buying power and the particular significance of female participation in the movement. Women – *Schober & Zoch* confirm – have a specific relation to the labour market which has consequences upon them even when they take leave and when it comes to the gendered division of domestic work.

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