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# Full Metal Yellow Jacket

Alèssi Dell’Umbria

January 21<sup>st</sup>, 2019

“Oh shit!”

– Louis XVI, 21 January 1793.

**Let’s make the most of a good thing! The Zeitgeist reveals itself in revolt, each time in new forms. With the movement against the Labor Law in spring 2016, there was the *cortège de tête*; in Spring 2018, it was the defense of the communized rural territory of the ZAD; most recently, in Autumn 2018, the Yellow Vests movement erupted into uncontrolled blockades and demonstrations, which are still ongoing.**

*An unknown but familiar territory has begun to take on a political existence. The yellow vests have situated themselves in a peripheral space made up of non-places: roundabouts, motorway tolls, shopping center parking lots – the same circulatory axes along which the atomized functions to which neo-urbanites are consigned are organized and distributed. This daily environment of millions of people stuck in early morning and late afternoon traffic jams seemed to have neutralized any possibility of an event. Statistics suggest that half of the French population lives in this periphery. All of these people had*

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*been desperately invisible...in order to exist, they had to put on a yellow vest, just as others had needed a balaclava or a black North Face jacket... The fact that the Adama Traoré committee was so quick to call for people to join the yellow vest rallies in Paris is a case in point: Beaumont-sur-Oise, the border point between the Parisian suburbs and what was once the Parisian countryside, embodies precisely this periphery of the metropolis that has taken on a political existence (in this case since the murder of Adama Traoré) and does not intend to give it up.*

To use a term that is far from innocent, it could be said that this movement is an essentially *provincial* one, and in a way that is entirely unprecedented. Demonstrations and riots are erupting in small towns where nothing usually happens – the same places where the state has been busy shuttering train stations, post offices, schools, maternity wards—why spend public money on country bumpkins [*parpagnàs*]<sup>(1)</sup>? Yellow Vests are cropping up everywhere. A riot in Nantes, St Nazaire, Caen, Rouen is plausible enough, but in Beauvais, Bar-le-Duc, Narbonne, Le Puy, Angers? Surprise! It's a known fact that the vast majority of the rioters who looted the beautiful Parisian districts on December 1 and 8 came from these same provinces. Their wandering through Paris was more like hooligans on a stroll through enemy territory than a traditional trade union demonstration. Contempt for small provincial people, so typical of the Parisian national elites, finally receives a reply. A decade ago, it was already being said that Paris had become so thoroughly pacified and gentrified that nothing is left to do but loot and vandalize it. Never before has this claim been transformed into action in such exemplary fashion.

*The province is a typical French construct. In the common parlance, which expresses the hierarchical organization of the nation, we go 'up' to Paris and 'back down' to the provinces. The capital, whose lights*

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<sup>(1)</sup> Dell'Umbria uses the term *parpagnàs*, which suggests something like country hick, as well as those who are part of the surplus economy, undesirables.

*illuminate the entire hexagon, is enthroned at the top of the pyramid. More generally, in the current configuration of capitalism the relationship between the periphery and the center is arranged in a networked, rather than concentric fashion. However, in nation-states as centralized and centralist as France, traffic networks must be superimposed over this concentric organization of the territory, which still remains decisive. By heading 'up' to Paris to terrorize the bourgeois of the 8<sup>th</sup> Arrondissement, the Yellow Vests overturned the pyramid.*

The 'peripheral' nature of the movement is not only geographical and political. The longstanding centrality of the factory as the axis around which movements revolve here finds itself called into question. It is no longer the company that serves as the initial point of aggregation. The people who are finding each other at blockades generally do not know each other beforehand, which means that their complicities come into being through voluntary acts that can only be described as political. Hence the dismay of the unions, most of whom had already signed a nonaggression pact with Macron's party at the beginning of December (only *Solidaires* and a handful of local chapters of the CGT union<sup>(2)</sup> refused this explicit gesture of collaboration). All of this indicates well-enough the exhaustion of the trade union movement, already clearly visible in spring 2016.

The Marxian analysis postulates that the genesis of exchange value is to be found in production, a value which the circulation of commodities merely serves to realize. In this dynamic, which literally is capitalism, all moments are dependent on one another and have their reality only in relation to the totality they constitute thereby. Not only does circulation add value to products and itself generate profits (indeed, an entire industry has developed to ensure this fact, including banking, insurance, marketing, transport, storage, mass distribution, as well as their related activities), but it is increasingly difficult to even separate these two moments from

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<sup>(2)</sup> The CGT is the largest labor union in France.

each other in the first place.<sup>1</sup> This is blatantly obvious when we consider commodities such as energy. The production of a nuclear power plant is inconceivable without the high-voltage lines that distribute the electricity, as is true of the supply lines and service stations linked to every oil refinery. By the same token, textiles made in China can only be produced there thanks to the giant container ships that will transport the precious T-shirts to Western ports—and no one can claim that maritime transport does not create value. At the furthest extreme, the Internet embodies the pure circulation of value, rendered almost totally independent of the exploitation of living labor – except, of course, for the electronic and computer components that make all of this possible, which must still be produced in factories... It has become difficult to single out a single segment of activity that could be called “production” from the totality of the other kinds of work and exchange that make up what we call society. In the 70’s, the Italian comrades were already talking about the ‘social factory’ – a deliberate oxymoron, given that a factory is not a society but a system. Today it is perhaps more correct to speak of a ‘global factory’, since we live in a moment in which the capitalist enterprise attempts to seize upon and reconfigure all that exists in accordance with the model of the factory or the plant. ‘Hubs’, – whether for land, sea or air traffic – shopping areas, and even highways are only so many cogs in the global factory. The distinction between the private and public spheres that defined the relationship between civil society and the state following the French Revolution has disappeared under the influence of apparatuses that today constitute the real force organizing the circulation of individuals. In the global factory, society

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<sup>1</sup> The circulation of goods is not only about the transport and distribution of products: for example, goods have already begun to circulate in commodity exchanges, even though they have not yet physically moved. Conversely, raw materials sold to an industrial company for processing are thus valued, because they have been purchased, and they will be included in the determination of the value of the finished product: here circulation is preliminary to production.

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has been hollowed out, and the State becomes little more than a service provider.

The great cycles of workers' struggles ended with the crisis of the Fordist system. Since the second half of the 1970's, most of the struggles in Western Europe have been focused on opposing the closure of companies and the atomization of the workers, and all of them ended in cruel defeats. Steel, mines, shipyards, then other major sectors of industry—all the strongholds of the working class went down the same way. We can date the precise historical moment when everything changed irreparably: it begins with the defeat of FIAT workers in Turin in the autumn of 1980, continues in France with the defeat of the unskilled immigrant Talbot workers in 1983, and ends with the defeat of the British miners in the spring of 1985. The same cycle that has been completed in Western Europe is now resurfacing in India and China...

*This eclipse of the factory's centrality in struggle leads us to hypothesize that the next wave of insurrections will be forced to seize upon businesses from the outside, and not the other way around (formulated in Marxian terms, they will depart from the sphere of circulation, in order to take over production). In other words, they will resemble the Yellow Vests movement, whose movement toward the center departs from the periphery. This will no longer take place within the purview of 'self-management', in which workers seize control of their factories, but rather in reverse: through an organized rupture with the logic of the global factory, forces arriving from outside would take over the factory and dismantle it according to their own needs. We are obviously not there yet. Still, the multiplication of revolts in the periphery, from the riots in the suburbs in 2005 to the current Gilets Jaunes movement, indicates that a new cycle is beginning, very different from those preceding it, and which continues to surprise us.*

Among the Yellow Vests, everything is situated in the sphere of circulation, not only the initial demands, but also the non-places in which they have been expressed. The demand to rescind the fuel tax may well have been the first time that a movement of such mag-

nitude has emerged from this sphere. Of course, the green “bike path” bourgeoisie made sure to ridicule their ‘retrograde’ demand. However, in a world based on forced mobility, fuel prices are anything but innocent, unless you live and work in the city center (and we know who now occupies the French city centers...). Suburban workers are literally trapped by this apparatus, which forces them to work to buy cars that they can’t do without...if they want to get to work! As a result, their action is centered on roundabouts, toll-booths, car park entrances, all the elements of this apparatus. Two centuries ago, the plebs revolted against increases in the price of bread; today, they are in revolt against the increase in the price of gasoline.<sup>2</sup>

*That the question of fuel is an eminently strategic one is something our governments have understood for a long time. At the height of the general strike of May 1968, they organized a fuel shortage (although large stocks were still available), so they could suddenly replenish the service stations just before the Pentecost long weekend...and millions*

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<sup>2</sup> Small business owners who refused to tax diesel fuel, which would increase their overhead costs, did not fail to disassociate themselves from the beggars who intended to sue. A yellow vest from Ales thus denounced the betrayal of certain people on December 20 of last year: “Shame on the ‘apolitical’ people pretending to lead the Yellow Vests of the Cévennes by raising the specter of the “anarchist” which the intelligence services have whispered into their ears... (...) Today, I no longer wish to choose my words wisely. But it is with great serenity that I accuse these so-called “coordinators” of being sell-outs and traitors of the worst kind. Because the naked truth is that a fraction of entrepreneurs promised everything to the poor seniors, the unemployed, those surviving off of minimum wage and the precarious in order to get them to join their ranks. Once the tax cancellations were achieved, these people purported to structure the movement so that it would take a new direction, all with the aim of stopping this historical movement in order to stuff themselves with money during the Christmas and New Year holidays.(...) As for you, neighbours and colleagues who have been mobilized for weeks; you who have not given up anything in the wind, cold or rain; you who have rediscovered solidarity and dignity on the roadblocks; you, the anonymous base with no other ambitions than to live properly, I greet you and send you the warm greetings of the Yellow Jackets in Alsace, Franche-Comté, on the A7 and in Bollène!”

*be seen. Which is related to the limited effectiveness of the blockades: the police have so far had no difficulty in restoring access to strategic sites such as oil refineries. At this level, little has changed since the spring of 2016. In addition, self-appointed demonstration marshals have been appearing in the Saturday marches for some time now, whether they be comprised of ex-soldiers or defecting CGT marshals. Even if their ability to control the crowds is limited, this practice cannot be allowed to establish itself...*

Since it does not obey any vertical and centralized direction, the current movement has allowed local initiatives to multiply. But these can diverge completely from one place to another. After two months of unrest, the time for a decision is approaching. A party, in the historical sense of the term, proves itself to be the winning party by splitting itself into two parties: it thus shows that it contains within itself the principle it has previously opposed in an external way, and thereby sheds the one-sidedness from which it arose. The opposing elements that coexist within the movement have so far been held together by a common hostility to the current regime. Those in favour of an institutional outcome—which would obviously be authoritarian and xenophobic in nature—will find themselves opposed by those seeking to spread the movement to all the aspects of the global factory, within a revolutionary perspective. In fact, workplace struggles are multiplying, and yellow vests join *chasubles rouges* [red jackets of the unions during strikes] on picket lines. It is not impossible to imagine that the movement can provide enough momentum that workers decide to begin blocking their companies from within with concrete demands. National trade union leaders would watch themselves be tossed into the dustbin of history, and a new historical sequence could finally open to which everyone would have to become party, and take sides [*prenne parti*].

The latest news is that in Landes, the Gilets Jaunes are blocking a Monsanto factory, a keystone in the global factory...

of the excesses of finance—which ignores what is essential, namely the criticism of value, money and commodification—encourages all manner of miraculous solutions and demagoguery. We remember the tired joke of the Tobin tax, for example, or the Dutch candidate who declared, “my enemy is finance” (it was a good joke!). When almost all workers work to pay off their debt (especially on their cars...), it is normal that banks become privileged targets, both in words and in vandalism (shout-out to the Yellow Vests in Toulouse who looted several banks last Saturday!). But there is reason to be wary when the references to Rothschild Bank are so insistent by contrast with those to BNP-Paribas or Société Générale (whose 2008 bailout by the State ended up costing taxpayers 30 billion Euros...). The fact that Macron began his career precisely at this bank obviously excites this anti-capitalism of fools who obsessively point the finger at “Jewish finance” on social networks.

*It may be that this regime really is at its end. Protected by its soldiers, it can endlessly multiply its effronteries – the scandalous measures it announced against the unemployed at the end of December, for instance. The headlong rush into repressive escalation has only worsened since spring 2016. The attack on the occupations at the ZAD in Notre-dame-des-landes in April-May provided the occasion for major operations. Serious injuries and mutilations by the dozens, collective and individual humiliations, beatings, police intimidation going hand-in-hand with media exaggeration (the outraged reaction of the entire media caste to the solidarity that followed Christophe Dettinger’s beautiful act speaks volumes about the disgusting cynicism of these minions of power, especially when they conveniently fail to mention demonstrators methodically mutilated by the police). Orders are given from on high to inflict severe injuries, as even some police commissioners have admitted. People are learning, and we see more and more demonstrators coming equipped with gas masks, ski goggles, scarves, gloves, etc. to protect themselves. But nowhere does the movement have a sufficient degree of organization to defeat the police, and it is here that the demobilizing nature of pacifist speech can*

*of relieved French people, who were following the “events” as spectators, rushed out onto the roads. A machination of this kind probably did more against the movement than half a million pro-De Gaulle demonstrators on the Champs-Élysées.<sup>3</sup>*

Unlike the *mass worker* of the Fordist era, today’s atomized workers no longer have any room to maneuver on the wage, which consequently stagnates even as everything else gets more expensive. They therefore find themselves struggling against taxes on their incomes. On the left, some suggest that in doing so they are taking up a classic theme of liberal ideology, that of lowering taxes. This is true of some Yellow Vests, small bosses and traders. But the majority are well aware that in this case, if there has been a tax cut, it was applied exclusively to very high incomes, in particular through the abolition of the wealth tax<sup>(3)</sup>. Moreover, while the question of wages begins with the company, that of taxes begins with the State, which ensures that it automatically picks up a political resonance (especially given the extent to which fuel taxes feed the State budget).<sup>4</sup> From this point of view, the fact that toll booths are destroyed and radars sabotaged shows that this racket is increasingly perceived as a system of parasitism worthy of the *Ancien Régime*. Except that this time it is not the *fermiers généraux*<sup>(4)</sup> who are feeding off people, but the State and companies like Vinci who manage the freeways... Moreover, it cannot escape anyone that, in recent weeks, many Yellow Vests have moved towards de-

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<sup>3</sup> It was Michel Jobert, then Chief of Staff to Prime Minister Georges Pompidou, who organized this operation – he bragged about it publicly twenty years later.

<sup>4</sup> In Mexico, for example, the increase in gasoline prices in January 2016 caused a wave of massive demonstrations, often turning into riots and looting, which certainly did not owe anything to neoliberal ideology!

<sup>(3)</sup> The solidarity tax on wealth was implemented by the Socialist Party in 1981 as a way to tax the rich. This tax was abolished in September 2017.

<sup>(4)</sup> The *fermiers généraux* were the main tax collectors in a highly unpopular tax farming system in France during the *ancien régime*.

mands that are more social than fiscal (increasing the minimum wage in particular) even if the return of the wealth tax still figures at the top of their list.

Under the Ancien Régime, anti-fiscal revolts broke out incessantly, especially in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, which saw the consolidation of the absolute monarchy.<sup>5</sup> With the French Revolution, a complete reversal took place: paying taxes became a civic act, as did enlisting in the army (whereas previously people fled when the recruiting sergeant turned up). This is the bourgeoisie's historical tour de force, and there is nothing to suggest that it has exhausted all its effects. Since then, refusing to pay tax has been treated as an Ancien Régime *gesture*. *The left, whose only horizon is that of republican institutions, can no longer raise this issue. Within the political binary of right and left, it was customary for this anti-fiscal dimension to be the prerogative of the liberal right, while the Keynesian left advocated redistribution through state mechanisms financed by tax levies. Now that the political left and right hold the same positions, the old tradition of anti-fiscal revolt can reappear... What is paradoxical is that this is taking place explicitly in reference to the French Revolution — tricolor flags, "The Marseillaise", demonstrators in Phrygian caps...*

In a little over a month and a half, the Yellow Vests have achieved what the unions have been unable to do over the past two decades. Since they do not organize within a union framework, the Yellow Vests are not limited by its institutionalized modes of action nor deceived by its subsidized bureaucrats. This has made for some beautiful riots in Paris, to which provincial proletarians flocked (and even if some of the Yellow Vests do not accept this vandalism, their mere presence made it possible, and there were no union marshals around to crush the enthusiasm). The classical demonstration is replaced by a wandering. Whereas the *cortège de tête* [head of the

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<sup>5</sup> Taxation and military conscription were the main reasons for sedition. For an illuminating analysis of this phenomena, see Boris Porchnev's book, *Les soulèvements populaires en France de 1623 à 1648*, Paris 1963.

*friend who participated in the 2011 insurrection mentioned the ability of the insurgents to mobilize quickly via social networks in the first few days, but also the fact that the police very quickly understood these benefits and did not hesitate to intervene by spreading fake news and misinformation. The quantity of false debates circulating on such networks in France is undoubtedly of the same order.*

After two months of unrest, the question of the articulation between the roundabouts and the general assemblies now asserts itself. On the one hand, the links of proximity and complicity established on the ground [*sur zone*] which make it possible to take action without having to deliberate—and we know how demoralizing deliberations in assemblies can be when it comes to direct action!—but which can only be exercised at the local level; on the other hand, assemblies directly linked to each other which could act as a forum for strategic reflection and tactical coordination.

*In contrast to this perspective, Yellow Vests could indeed give birth to a demagogic movement like the 5 Stars in Italy. A fraction of the movement will probably be tempted to follow this path, even if it means cutting itself off from the rest of the movement. It should be remembered, however, that the 5 Star movement was produced in an entirely artificial manner — even if it rode the brief wave of the Forconi movement [It: Pitchfork protests]. As things stand at present, the Yellow Vests lack the type of media buffoonery necessary to attract the attention of the crowds, provided in the 5 Stars case by the figure of Beppe Grillo, a public entertainer dressed up for the job by some businessmen who saw that the Berlusconi interlude had spun out and a new trinket urgently needed to be launched. Italy has gone from several decades of secret government (P2, Andreotti, the strategy of tension and alliances with the mafia) to TV show government (Mani Pulite, Berlusconi and Beppe Grillo). The problem with this mode of government is that one has to reshuffle the key characters just as frequently as show-biz does with its star system.*

In a time when post-Fordist capitalism owes its survival to the rise of fictitious capital and now operates openly, the denunciation

*lead to any change in the matter. If it is necessary to speak in terms of subjectivization, the voting apparatus creates a certain type of individual with a damaged relationship to existence, and particularly as concerns politics and public affairs.” Moreover, it is hard to imagine the government calling a referendum on property taxes (according to surveys, 2/3 of the French are in favor).*

The regime has had so much trouble finding interlocutors that it had to go fishing on Facebook. The majority of the self-proclaimed leaders, almost instantly cast off by the Yellow Vests, are carefully staged on television shows, and the media systematically co-opts anyone with dubious affinities – providing ample incentives to self-righteous leftists to begin condemning the movement. Never before have the media been so obviously what they are, namely, the *second* pillar on which the regime stands (after the police). Their aim is to adjust everyone to the idea that beyond this regime there lies nothing but the extreme right—and in any case, we all know how popular the latter are among the police. Macron already won the presidential elections on this lie, and now the stronghold-against-the-*Front-National*-president has a new trick, the “Grand débat”, and you’ll never guess what the first issue will be...immigration!

*The importance of so-called social networks in this case is far from anecdotal. In the periphery, the network socializes. But all these people who found themselves in a yellow vest after heeding a Facebook call had an experience that is not virtual. The question now is whether the Gilets Jaunes have rejected the political class in order to inaugurate a kind of internet democracy where likes would replace ballot papers, or whether, as the Yellow Vests of Commercy explicitly invite them to do, they will organize themselves into a new type of assembly. Because the network only socializes in a closed circuit that generates its own bubble [génération l’entre-soi] and where the charisma of certain “whistleblowers” has full latitude to capture intensities. A form of media manipulation more fragmented than the mainstream media could indeed function as a technique of governance. A Tunisian*

march,<sup>(5)</sup>] was still dependent on the trade union demonstration, and reached its limits on May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2018 (where there was a *cortège de tête* as large as the entire trade union procession, with a huge black bloc in the middle of it, and all this for an insignificant result); once it is freed from any notion of a *cortège*, the crowd begins to drift! Union parades are disciplined and disciplinary, and keep to the avenues of the city centers, places of representation *par excellence*. Meanwhile the stampedes of Yellow Vests in Paris in November and December 2018 were marked above all by their diffuse character and freedom of movement.

However, things appear to be taking a turn for the worse. Since mid-December, people in Paris have been declaring march routes to the police in advance, and on January 12 we saw the reappearance of trade union-style protest marshals, although it is unclear who appointed them.<sup>(6)</sup> It is no coincidence that these forces reappear precisely at the moment representatives begin to retake control. In provincial cities, however, Yellow Vests have continued their joyfully uncontrolled wandering; as we said above, the heart of the movement is playing out in the provinces. In Marseille on January 12, the Yellow Vests’ wandering drove the people responsible for repressing them completely insane, and their unpredictable zig-zags through the streets (and even a highway tunnel) left the robocops gasping for breath.

The blockades have often taken the form of camps evoking the ZAD. This raises a question: could we not see in them the premises of an “insurrectionary urbanism” to come? What is one to do with all these sites whose only interest is tactical, namely, to be located on traffic routes? Not since the 2005 suburban revolt has the critique of urban planning been so present in practice. Warding off the

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<sup>(5)</sup> Demonstrations in France are traditionally led with labor unions at the front of the march. During the *Loi Travail* movement, the *cortège de tête* appeared as an antagonistic block that led the demonstrations.

<sup>(6)</sup> It turns out it was the fascists who organized this, and they were outed online.

event [*conjur*er l'événement]—this was always what this relentless extension of the global factory was about. The tightly-regulated flow of goods that organizes space must above all prevent anything from happening, whether it be an accident, an earthquake, a blockade, or a riot. For the time being, it is extremely vulnerable, just as a Fordist assembly line lay at the mercy of simple sabotage. It is not by chance that in several places the Yellow Vests have blocked access to Amazon warehouses, an emblematic company if ever there was one...<sup>6</sup>

*The camps are the elementary form of communication, from Occupy Oakland to Taksim Square, from the saplings on the Oaxaca zocalo (central square) to the Lakota and Standing Rock anti-pipeline camps, from the ZAD to the No-TAV presidio in the Susa Valley. The construction of space comes primarily as a political affirmation. Whereas demonstrations remain indifferent to the space through which they pass, occupations lead to the production of something common that re-configures its place. In this respect, the blockades of the Yellow Vests are the opposite of the assemblies that defined Nuit debout: whereas the latter took place exclusively in central squares, in accordance with the hierarchical injunction that orders urban and suburban space, and gave primacy to speech therein, the Yellow Vest blockades almost always occur in peripheral areas or on major traffic routes. In this case, a primacy is given to the very action of the blockade itself and the relationships it establishes between the participants. This is the great innovation of this movement. Moreover, whereas the organizers of Nuit Debout negotiated with the prefecture to be allowed to remain in their place, the majority of the current blockades are imposed without anyone demanding anything.*

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<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, the impact of blockades must be put into perspective... while trade in city centres may have been affected by the riots, which affected their turnover, the effectiveness of blockades is far from obvious. Supplies continued to be made, gas stations were never short of fuel, supermarket shelves continued to be filled and Christmas squandering was left to run its course as in previous years.

however, the 'RIC' also offers a way for the movement to turn down the heat. That this would lead us into a void by no means prevents the idea of the referendum from functioning as a meta-demand that draws together all the various elements of this extremely heterogeneous dynamic. The people who have drawn their strength only through the assemblies are enthusiastic about this proposal, even though this pseudo-consultation would effectively shove everyone back upon their initial isolation as voters, trapped by binary decisions about trick questions that the sovereign deems appropriate to present to the rabble. The referendum is the highest form of political spectacle.<sup>11</sup>

*Macronia is ready to open up the field of representation so long as this means not having to give up anything concrete. They are therefore quite happy to throw a bone to all those under the sway of Chouard's hare-brained ideas. As Rafik Chekat says: "The problem of the referendum (RIC) is that it maintains the tyranny of the majority. Why should the majority always be right? Even without being too sensitive, belonging to a minority makes you suspicious of the majority, because you know very well that sometimes the majority looks more like a lynch mob. Can you imagine a #RIC right after #CharlieHebdo? It's no coincidence that the demand for the RIC comes from "whites". But even beyond the question of racism, what does majority-building mean in a consumer society at the time of #BFMTV, #TF1, [both private TV stations] and #Hanouna [a sexist and homophobic TV clown]? Fundamentally, the problem of the 'RIC' is that of voting, a mechanism that arranges our powerlessness into regular intervals. We could try to shorten the intervals and vote more often, but that wouldn't*

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<sup>11</sup> We saw in the case of Notre-Dame-des-Landes what this little institutional trick of the referendum was for — and Macron was a minister in the government that had tried this slick trick... Now we see what the *confusionnisme*<sup>(10)</sup> of demagogues like Etienne Chouard is for.

<sup>(10)</sup> The term *confusionnisme* refers to a policy of spreading confusion in people's minds. [www.confusionnisme.info/](http://www.confusionnisme.info/)

*One of the most interesting texts published on this movement refers to a “middle class tragedy” located in the relationship to money.<sup>10</sup> “The concern for money becomes permanent, particularly at the point where we finally gain access to it. We are middle class once we earn enough money that, whether we directly and consciously thematize it or not, it’s all we think about. (...) We might be in the best social position to know the value of money.” To this, we may add: if the most penniless people experience money only as a necessity, while for the rich it serves as the very expression of freedom, for the majority of workers the relationship to money is constantly torn between these two extremes. It is in this sense there can exist an effectively ‘middle’ class! It belongs to the very principle of the spectacle to constantly dangle such freedoms before us, such as that of being able to drive around in one’s own car, for example. That this spectacular freedom should have as its condition an everyday slavery is something we all intimately experience, without always being able to express it. It makes people sick, literally. And we must never overlook the fact that the therapeutic aspect of revolt is also what makes it so politically powerful.*

As long as the state occupies the horizon of waiting for popular uprisings, they inevitably prepare the bed for all manner of nationalist demagogues. It is therefore by no means an innocent move for Macron to pull out his wild card now with the proposal for the ‘citizens referendum initiative’ (RIC). As the Yellow Vests move toward social demands (an increase in minimum wages and pensions in particular), an attempt to stifle these developments is being made by presenting the ‘RIC’ as a miracle solution that would constitute a way out of this incredibly unpopular regime. At the same time,

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an echo among these people. But now they see that none of this is actually guaranteed — not even a well-deserved retirement after a hard-working life. Macronie is a managerial thinking applied to the whole society without political mediation. Capitalism in its essential brutality.

<sup>10</sup> “Gilets jaunes : la classe moyenne peut-elle être révolutionnaire?” Lundi-Matin, December 7, 2018.

There is one demand on which all the Yellow Vests unanimously agree: “Macron démission” [Macron resign!]. The country that guillotined its king is still, two centuries later, the most monarchical in Europe. This explains the typically *sans-culotte* furor that animates Yellow Vests.<sup>7</sup> But the monarch is no longer accorded the sacred characteristics that he possessed under the *Ancien Régime*: the French elect one, then hate him after a few months. The fact is that the monarch is a product, obsolete like everything that is produced nowadays. After the coke-head Sarkozy and the manic-depressive Holland, we have the arrogant golden boy who swoops in to bring the bipartisan regime of the Fifth Republic to its spectacular finale. The fact that he had never been elected before made him the perfect person for the job: while the political class, composed of mayors, presidents of general and regional councils, deputies and senators, was still mired in relationships of dependence, Macronie<sup>(7)</sup> freed the government from such a burden. Henceforth, the State coldly declares itself nothing more than a service provider for capital. There will be no more negotiated arrangements, only a pure injunction. In this respect, Macronian governance consecrates the replacement of civil society by the global factory. The presidential arrogance that today goes as far openly spewing insults (‘those ungrateful parasites!’) in fact only reproduces methods employed in the contemporary business world, which were themselves inspired by the training techniques developed by the army’s special forces.

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<sup>7</sup> The Constitution of the Fifth Republic grants the President powers that he had never had under previous parliamentary regimes, in particular the power to legislate by presidential decree without the National Assembly. We know that De Gaulle, who was of monarchist sensitivity, thought about establishing a constitutional monarchy in 1958. Which he did, in a way: a monarch, but who would now be elected.

<sup>(7)</sup> *Macronie* seems to be a jeering way to describe the Macron regime as a Kingdom in and of itself.

In the *Gilets Jaunes* movement, ‘the people’ has thus come to occupy the place of civil society so dear to the *citoyennistes*.<sup>(8)</sup> But this signifier only exists for a lack of better term—prior to the French Revolution, one would have spoken of the ‘vile multitude’ or the ‘plebs’. The people only ever comes into being through a game of mirrors with the State, a supposedly-homogeneous entity that faces the monarch (the famous 99%...). This double reflection is today exacerbated by the monarchical character of Macron’s presidency. Yet the people refers to the Nation and therefore to the republican state, both products of the French Revolution. To postulate a truth inherent to this subject, and which a referendum is supposed to reveal—this where demagoguery begins, whether that of the *Front National* or *La France Insoumise*.<sup>(9)</sup> “Left-wing populism should direct these affects towards democratic objectives,” says Chantal Mouffe, who adds that, “the people are always a collective subject, built in a discursive way.” That this construction necessarily implies the exclusion of immigrants, social welfare recipients, and others never seems to bother the supporters of this subgramscism. Furthermore, the politicians who try to claim the term ‘the people’ wind up promulgating the same themes as their symmetrical opponents: the demagogue Ruffin praises the confusionist Chouard, while Mélenchon declares his fascination with Eric Drouet... Populism consists in pandering to the affects produced by this world and maintaining them as something positive, whereas a revolutionary attitude places its trust in a future that gives birth to new forms of political sensitivity throughout the course of the struggle. Let’s never lose sight of the fact that the negative is the driving force behind any movement. In fact, in all these rebel camps that are multiply-

<sup>(8)</sup> *Le citoyennisme* refers to a neo-republican discourse centering on the *citoyen* [citizen] as political actor. It can be broadly characterised as a moderate and reformist tendency, often aiming to use participatory democracy as a means of ‘repairing’ or ‘correcting’ the immoral tendencies of capitalist society.

<sup>(9)</sup> Mélenchon’s left-wing populist party, translated as ‘France Unbowed’.

ing throughout the world, the transcendent figure of the people gives way to the immanence of the common.<sup>8</sup>

The social classes, clearly identifiable until the end of Fordism, have since been liquefied, a fact which is reflected in the blanket term *middle class*, which is significant precisely in that it identifies nothing. In rich countries like France, the ‘middle class’ presumably consists of almost everyone apart from the bourgeoisie at the top, and immigrant workers and the unemployed at the bottom! One could say that a Marseilles dock worker, for example, is part of the old working class through his work, and part of the new middle class through his way of life and aspirations (building a house, taking out loans, ensuring that his children go to school and vacationing at dream destinations). The Yellow Vests identify themselves first of all as workers (even if they are retired, and plenty of them in this movement are), but what is paradoxical is the fact that they do so *outside* the sphere of the workplace, properly speaking. Their recurring complaint is, “we work and we don’t get by” (or for retirees, “we’ve worked all our lives and we barely have enough to eat”). All these people have been led to believe that a life of hard work will sooner or later be rewarded with a certain level of comfort; but they are forced to realize that this perspective is never more than an endless ladder that they will continue to climb all their lives.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> In the great era of anti-monarchical revolts in Occitan countries, revolts identified themselves as “lo comun” [the common], much more than “lo pòble” [the people]. The common is precisely the political concept that corresponds to a revolutionary future for struggles.

<sup>9</sup> The notion of “moral economy” which some have used to refer to the *Gilets Jaunes* does not seem relevant to us in this case – not only because E. P. Thompson made this formulation in reference to the English working class that has since disappeared, not to mention the “common decency” so dear to George Orwell. Certainly a work ethic is still widespread in working class circles where, if not enriching oneself by working for the masses, one hopes at least to achieve a certain security, a relative ease and, at the very least, a vague feeling of personal dignity. In this respect, Sarkozy’s “Working more to earn more” could find