

STAGING “LE PEUPLE” IN YELLOW VESTS: A READING OF THE GILETS
JAUNES

by

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Certificate of Approval

This is to certify that the accompanying thesis by Yann H. M. Dardonville has been accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with Honors in Politics.

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Introduction

On April 7, 2019, the *gilets jaunes*' second *Assemblée des Assemblées* ("Assembly of Assemblies") concluded after three days of drawn-out deliberation inside the *Maison du Peuple* ("Home of the People") of Saint-Nazaire, located within the town's former employment office. More than two hundred delegations from different regions in France had united to produce a list of action items that would be brought back to their constituents and discussed within smaller, local assemblies. Gathered together in front of a camera, members wearing yellow vests took turns passing around a microphone as they delivered their address to "the People in its entirety." Upon finishing, they pumped their fists in the air and chanted loudly: "*Le pouvoir du Peuple, par le Peuple, pour le Peuple. Ne nous regardez pas, rejoignez-nous!*" [The power of the People, for the People, by the People. Do not watch us, join us!]¹²

It was an address from "the people" to "the people in its entirety"—but also an implicit message of defiance, directed at the government, which would not fall on deaf ears: in the six months of protests, the *gilets jaunes* had already made their presence deeply felt throughout the country. The revolt began on November 17, 2018, when around 300,000 protesters in yellow vests first took to the streets—with hundreds more occupying roundabouts, tollbooths, and parking lots—to voice their anger against an

¹ *GILETS JAUNES : APPEL DE LA 2E ASSEMBLÉE DES ASSEMBLÉES / Saint-Nazaire - 7 Avril 2019, YouTube*, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c5ZXhJ7EcrY>)

² In this essay, not all translations from French will be placed in brackets: for reasons of length, I translate directly from a variety of French sources without leaving the French.

announced increase of the tax on gas.³ In following weeks and months, however, demonstrations quickly evolved to articulate much broader demands around social, fiscal, and environmental justice. With common refrains like “Macron resign!” and “We can’t take it anymore!”, they effectively came to express a generalized *ras-le-bol* (state of being fed up) amongst France’s popular classes, tired of living month to month, tired of uneven wealth distribution, and tired of the government’s aggressive austerity measures.⁴

The uprising put pressure on President Macron to make a number of concessions. He revoked the gas tax hike, and also increased the minimum wage by €100/month and pledged modest cuts to income taxes for lower and average earners. Yet these measures did not abate the protesters’ anger in the slightest. Not only did they fail to adequately address the scope of the rising inequalities to which the *gilets jaunes* were subjected, they also failed to grasp the extent of their demands.

For the *gilets jaunes* protests, which are still ongoing, have not simply been a struggle against economic precarity; they have also intensely critiqued the ability of the Vth Republic’s institutions to represent the popular will. In addition to making direct democracy measures like the RIC (Citizen’s Initiative Referendum) a cornerstone of their demands, members have rejected practically all forms of intermediation and cooptation—even by supposedly “populist” parties on both the far left and right, like *La France insoumise* and the *Rassemblement National*. Their movement reflects, in other words, a growing tension emerging from the French Constitution, which at once enshrines in Article 2 the principle of “government of the people, by the people, and for the people,”

³ Aurélie Dianara, “Happy Birthday, Gilets Jaunes,” *Jacobin*, November 2019, <https://jacobinmag.com/2019/11/gilets-jaunes-yellow-vests-movement-protests-anniversary-france>

⁴ It must be noted that the movement also received high levels of support from the general population, even months into the protests.

while privileging electoral democracy as the principal means for giving form to popular sovereignty in Article 3.⁵

The scene from inside the *Maison du Peuple* makes this tension clear: in chanting their aforementioned slogan, “The power of the people, for the people, by the people,” the *gilets jaunes* effectively re-articulate a constitutionally-legitimated principle, though in a context explicitly situated outside of the mechanisms of the State. Put differently, while the French state derives its sovereignty from the tacit consent of the governed, the *gilets jaunes* have reinterpreted this principle to ground the authority of their political claims within the mantle of popular sovereignty.

Much ink has been spilled by social scientists keen to understand “who” exactly constitutes this newly emerged “people” in yellow vests. Surveys from the early months of the protest shed light on a heterogeneous group of individuals, mostly employed in the labor and service industries, but also made up of small business owners. At that point in time, the group was composed of slightly more men than women (55% to 45%), with the average age around 45 years old. They had average levels of education, and many had little to no experience participating in politics.⁶ These demographics have not changed significantly since then. But while the particular composition of the *gilets jaunes* is important to understand, it is not the question at the center of my thesis.

Instead, as I have already signaled with my brief analysis of the *gilets jaunes*’ address above, the interest of this thesis lies more so in “how” the movement has undertaken claiming and presenting “the people,” especially with regards to how they

⁵ “Constitution of 4 October 1958,” Conseil constitutionnel, accessed April 2, 2020, <https://www.conseil-constitutionnel.fr/en/constitution-of-4-october-1958>)

⁶ A more detailed overview of their sociological composition can be found in “‘Gilets Jaunes,’ une enquête pionnière sur “la révolte des revenus modestes,” *Le Monde*, December 12, 2018.

currently find expression through the State. Underlying this form of analysis is the understanding that “the people,” far from being a complete and pre-given whole, does not empirically exist; in reality, the term remains a fundamentally contested, open to claims and reinterpretation by any collective of individuals. Consequently, I draw from theories like Jason Frank’s “constituent moments,” Judith Butler’s notion of performed or enacted sovereignty, and Jacques Rancière’s “staging dissensus” to frame my observations about the *gilets jaunes*. Thinking of their claims as “staged” allows me to consider the ways in which the movement both asserts its authority and produces new political relations, spaces, and actors.

By analyzing different scenes from the movement—with an emphasis in particular on speech acts and elements of the *mise-en-scène*—my thesis proposes that the *gilets jaunes* stage the people in direct response to perceived deficits in representation under the constitutional regime of the Vth Republic. In the process, they reconfigure popular sovereignty as being expressed through more autonomous and direct ways of being.

The first chapter of this thesis looks at how the people have appeared within the institutional practices of the current constitutional regime. The thesis then moves on to look at how these practices have gradually frayed, producing a crisis of representation out of which the *gilets jaunes* emerge. Then, by virtue of employing theoretical frames which envision “the people” as claimed and enacted, I explore how the *gilets jaunes* have both responded to these crises and aesthetically articulated a new democratic subject across different “stages.” Specifically, I focus my attention on mass protests and the occupation

of roundabouts. The piece concludes with a reflection about what the emergence of this new democratic subject may mean for the future of the Vth Republic.

While the *gilets jaunes* protests have wound down since 2018, it is nonetheless crucial to remember that they are far from over; the movement continues to evolve and restructure itself in order to adapt to a changing political situation. In November of 2019, the *gilets jaunes* called for their members' participation in trade union strikes against the government's announced pension reforms on December 5, kicking off more than three months of resistance. It was a rare move for the yellow vests, who had hesitated until then to join forces with unions over distrust of vertical leadership. However, as weeks of social protest went by, the extent to which many *gilets jaunes* had forged deep connections with union organizers and militants became increasingly clear: according to labor historian, Samuel Hayat, they were now "exchanging modes of action."⁷ Lucie Délaporte resumed the situation succinctly for Jacobin in an article from December 28, "If more classic forms of social struggle are back on the agenda, the *gilets jaunes* continue to cast a shadow."⁸ It is precisely this shadow to which this thesis intends to give greater substance.

⁷ Lucie Delaporte, "The Gilets Jaunes Have Changed How France Thinks About Strikes," Jacobin, December 31, 2019, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2019/12/gilets-jaunes-strikes-trade-unions-macron>

⁸ Ibid.

Chapter I: The Fifth Republic and the People

Before making legible the ways in which the *gilets jaunes* stage “the people,” we must first direct our attention to how the figure of the people finds articulation within the current representational structures of the French Republic. Although all French constitutions subscribe to the concept of popular sovereignty originally set out in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen of 1789, there is significant variation as to how that sovereignty finds articulation within the nation’s various institutions. A constitution, after all, is not just a written document, but “a spirit, institutions, a practice,” as the Fifth Republic’s first president, Charles de Gaulle, once declared in a press conference. Accordingly, my analysis begins by viewing how the current Constitution originally conceived the link between the nation’s institutions and the people, before describing how that relationship has generally been carried out since. It then remarks a growing disaffection with the Fifth Republic’s institutions, situating it specifically within the context of public policy and the practices of representation with which it is associated. Finally, the chapter closes out by identifying how the *gilets jaunes* emerge out of this context of diminished representation.

The New Constitution: A Solution to a Dilemma?

In March of 1959, not yet a full year into the Fifth Republic, constitutional scholar Georges Burdeau made the observation in an article for the *Revue française de science politique* that while the new constitution initially only seemed, on its face, to mark a change in “governmental techniques,” it actually signaled a profound departure from the

spirit of previous constitutions.⁹ In his reading, the document, coauthored by President De Gaulle, offered itself as a kind of synthesis, a solution to a dilemma which had long plagued previous French constitutional regimes: their perceived inability to reconcile the “authority” of the nation-state with the “democracy” of the people.¹⁰

The origin of this dilemma could be traced back to the Declaration of Rights of Man and Citizen, whose Article 6 stipulates that the “general will” of the nation should either find expression through the personal participation of the citizen, or by virtue of their representative.¹¹ This ambiguity at the heart of the general will, and by extension the people to whom it gives appearance, engendered historically different—as well as somewhat conflictual—“modalities of governance.”¹² According to Burdeau, the nation’s constitutional regimes tended to behave either as “governed democracies,” “governing democracies,” or some hybrid of the two. The Third Republic (1870-1940), a traditional representative democracy, typified the first, imagining a unified “national will” as abstracted from an undifferentiated population of “citizens,” all acting and thinking in lockstep.¹³ Meanwhile, the “dysfunctional” Fourth Republic (1946-1958) bore the form of a hybrid, retaining many of the representative structures of its predecessor, but also promising that decision-making power would rest in the hands of “infinitely diverse... situated men” in search for a collective state of “well-being.”¹⁴ For Burdeau, then, the dilemma between authority and democracy could also be expressed as the seeming

⁹ Georges Burdeau, “La Conception du Pouvoir selon la Constitution Française du 4 Octobre 1958,” *Revue Française de Science Politique* 9, no. 1 (1959): 87.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 89.

¹¹ “Declaration of the Rights of Man - 1789,” Avalon Project (Yale Law School, 2008), https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/rightsof.asp

¹² Martial Foucault, “« Je t’aime moi, non plus » : les Français et la Cinquième République,” in *La Ve démystifiée*, Académique (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2019), 200.

¹³ Burdeau, *Conception*, 95.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 96.

irreconcilability between two appearances of the “people”: passive “citizens,” all equal in the eyes of the law, and active “situated men,” differentiated in their social conditions, needs and desires.¹⁵

Whereas the Fourth Republic failed to syncretize these figures, Burdeau proposed that the Fifth Republic would bridge the divide through a novel approach: the restoration of the State as one of the “animating forces in political life.” Under the new constitution, the Executive, which under previous regimes had been relegated to a mere honorific, would now instead incarnate the “power of the Republic,” supposedly rising above partisan infighting in the Parliament to give cohesion to the national will. And, “to preserve its legitimacy,” the office would now be directly decided by “the people,” represented by the electoral college.¹⁶ Thus, the President became another representative, another intermediary body through which popular sovereignty would find articulation.

For Burdeau, this shift took shape through a notable change in constitutional language. Although the previous constitution also affirmed that sovereignty belonged to the people, it explicitly stated that this sovereignty was to be exercised by virtue of its “representatives at the National Assembly.” Meanwhile, Article 3 of the new constitution modified the language: popular sovereignty would simply be expressed by the people’s “representatives.” Burdeau believed that with the reintroduction of the president as representative, the people now took on a double role: in the presidential elections, voters would consider national interests as “citizens;” in the more frequently occurring parliamentary elections, on the other hand, they could make explicit their individual

¹⁵ Between “man” and “citizen.”

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 88.

demands and needs.¹⁷ More concisely resumed by Prime Minister Michel Debré, the President of the Republic embodied “national legitimacy,” while the Parliament articulated “democratic life.”¹⁸ Under the Fifth Republic, the authority of the State was to be harmoniously reconciled with the popular will; governed democracy with governing democracy; the interests of the abstract “citizen” with those of the concrete, “situated man.”¹⁹

Though Burdeau saw potential in the new constitution’s design for the healthy concomitance of these dual powers, he cautioned that the practical balance between them remained fragile. If the power of the Executive had been restored, it was not to promote a unified national will at the expense of suppressing individual voices. At the same time, the parties in the Parliament would have to ensure that the everyday priorities of the “people” did not override or threaten the national interest. Both powers, therefore, were responsible for checking the other in order to ensure that the “will of the French people”—in both the universal and the particular—would be expressed “in its plenitude.”²⁰

The Presidentialist Republic

Burdeau’s warnings proved prescient: more than half a century later, the equilibrium has tipped in favor of the Executive. In practice, the Fifth Republic exhibits a distinctly “presidentialist” tendency, with some even venturing as far as to call it a

¹⁷ Ibid., 96.

¹⁸ Ibid., 97.

¹⁹ Ibid., 96.

²⁰ Ibid., 100.

“monarchist republic.”²¹ Far from being “above” the Parliament, or independent from partisan politics, the president takes a decisive and driving role in partisan politics; inasmuch as they lead the nation, they also lead their parties.²² As the embodied figure of the national will, they are the focal point around which all of French politics revolves. This occurs, however, at the detriment of the Fifth Republic’s other constitutionally designated representational mechanisms, which are essentially absorbed into the vertical structure of the strong, administrative state.

The prepotent image of the president, enmeshed in all aspects of political life, amounts to a clear departure from the one originally conceived by President De Gaulle. He dreamed of a paternal chief of state who could “...rise above partisan struggles and appear as the father of the Nation, a ‘guide,’ a ‘protector,” separate from the public forum. However, as political scientist Nicholas Roussellier points out, his own actions undercut this rhetoric.²³ Concerned by the “Algerian question,” he pushed for a series of referendums between 1958 and 1962. While the last of these abolished the electoral college in favor of direct universal suffrage for presidential elections, the referendums generally had the effect of “anchoring presidential domination.”²⁴ In effect, by recurring directly to the public rather than passing through the parliament, De Gaulle relocated the center of gravity at the heart of French politics: more than the relationship between the government and the parliamentary majority, what mattered now was the direct relationship between the president and “his people.”²⁵

²¹ Nicolas Roussellier, “Un pouvoir présidentiel encombré de sa force,” in *La Ve démystifiée*, Académique (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2019), 11, Cairn.info.

²² *Ibid.*, 23.

²³ Roussellier, *Un pouvoir*, 22.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

Since the end of the first president's tenure, the presidentialist conception of power has only become further embedded. This, in the view of political commentator Bastien François, can be largely attributed to the efforts of a "modernizing elite" who, for the last half of the twentieth century, strongly advocated for a "managerial" model of state administration.²⁶ Coming out of specialized schools and amplified by powerful new media enterprises, these individuals set out to promote a new, technocratic vision of French society which privileged "the economy over rights, the executive over the legislative, and more still, technical competence over political representativity."²⁷ In particular, they promoted an alliance between high-level functionaries and "social-occupational" representatives in a kind of "sectorial corporatism" controlled by the State. Within this schema of governance, the ministries of *Matignon*, under the guidance of a prime minister who answered to the president, and armed with a legion of specialized experts, would set the legislative agenda around public policy. They became the "nobility of the State."²⁸ With power concentrated at the very top, parties on the left and the right subsequently came to see the conquest of the presidency as the linchpin to their success.²⁹ Whereas previous constitutional regimes had asserted the supremacy of the legislature, the Fifth Republic has made the presidency, for all intents and purposes, the golden goose of French politics.³⁰

²⁶ 5/14/20 11:18:00 AM

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 39.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 40.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 41.

³⁰ Recent constitutional revisions reinforce the centrality of the presidency by making presidential elections even more frequent and influential. With presidential elections now occurring just prior to legislative elections, presidents leverage their mandate in order to ensure their party's parliamentary majority—every presidential election since 2002 has concurred with the President's party winning the legislative majority. Along with the super-majority, the shortened mandate, from seven to five years, impels the President to involve themselves with greater zeal in the legislative process.

The presidentialist State captures the Fifth Republic's various intermediary bodies and places them in its orbit. The Parliament, for instance, has primarily taken on the role of reviewing and implementing public policy measures produced by the Executive. Representatives become functionaries—they are increasingly “professionalized,” technically competent, with members drawn in large quantities from the upper classes at the expense of the popular classes.³¹ Parties, moreover, have evolved from being “parties of class” to “parties of opinion.”³² That is to say, the “partisan world has transformed little by little into ‘a world apart,’ self-contained, a ‘very small world’ more and more incapable of hearing and articulating society’s demands.”³³ This does not mean that the Parliament is completely unable of articulating social concerns, or acting as a brake on the Executive.³⁴ However, the national agenda remains very much in the hands of the Executive, and its frequent recourse to constitutional tools such as Article 49-3, which allows the government to force the passage of bills with the accord of the Council of Ministers, often overrides any possible resistance.³⁵ Meanwhile, new representational structures, such as *intercommunalités* and *régions*, have not offset this imbalance despite their intention to decentralize State power; in reality, they have served to reinforce the role of the State and weaken autonomy within local governance.³⁶ The sites of

³¹ Olivier Rozenberg, “De la difficulté d’être un Parlement normal,” in *La Ve démystifiée*, Académique (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2019), 59, <https://www.cairn.info/la-cinquieme-republique-demystifiee--9782724624557-p-45.htm>.

³² Pierre Rosanvallon, *Le Parlement Des Invisibles*, Raconter La Vie (Paris: Seuil : Raconter la vie, 2014).

³³ Pascal Perrineau, “Remarques sur la construction et la déconstruction du système des partis (dialogue avec Marc Lazar),” in *La Ve démystifiée*, Académique (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2019), 163, Cairn.info.

³⁴ Anne-Laure Ollivier, “Le Parlement ou le dilemme de l’efficacité en démocratie,” in *La Ve démystifiée*, Académique (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2019), 72, <https://www.cairn.info/la-cinquieme-republique-demystifiee--9782724624557-p-67.htm>.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 75.

³⁶ Jacques Chevallier, “Vers l’État-plateforme ?,” *Revue française d’administration publique* 167, no. 3 (2018): 636, <https://doi.org/10.3917/rfap.167.0627>.

intermediation meant to give articulation to diverse interests and needs are constrained by the homogenizing presence of the State.

As a result, the dual appearance that Burdeau anticipated for the people under the Fifth Republic does not materialize. With an omnipotent president treating all political questions as national imperatives, the Parliament's lack of political autonomy, and the weakness of local governance, the articulation of individual needs becomes subsumed to the homogenizing question of the national will, figured by the president. Instead of Debré's assertion that "The President is national legitimacy; the Parliament is democratic life," the President effectively comes to incarnate both—they are the "homme-people," the "absolute representative of 'the people.'"³⁷ Bastien François remarks that the Fifth Republic, in the face of any social conflict, only seems to offer "...the outmoded vision of the providential man, to whom everything is delegated for five years, without a veritable counter power."³⁸

The Fifth Republic, then, may best be described as the constitutional regime of "the president and the people." While the figure of the president appears quite clear and outsized, however, the figure of "the people" remains abstract and passive. With both executive and legislative institutions existing "a world apart," the average citizen does not veritably have many opportunities to make their individual concerns and needs heard. They are left to watch the vertical State govern, only to be called upon to express their will in the limited electoral moment of the presidential election, or in the instance of the public-opinion poll.

³⁷ Foucault, "Je t'aimes...", 206.

³⁸ François, 43.

A Crisis of Representation

The authority of France's current constitutional regime reposes on a vertical conception of power, crystallized within the figure of the president, and on the image of the people that only becomes apparent as a majority of the electorate—as the Rousseauist “general will.” But for the government to preserve this authority, a significant portion of the population must identify with the image of “the people” produced by the nation's institutions. Despite the Fifth Republic's appearance of relative stability (compared to other constitutional regimes), popular disenchantment with the nation's intermediary bodies has grown increasingly visible over the last few decades.

In particular, 2017 marked the year when political frustration in France began to boil over. The dominant parties on the left and the right, the *Parti Socialiste* (PS) and the *Union pour un mouvement Populaire* (UMP), suffered devastating losses. As a consequence, the bipolar partisan system fragmented into multiple poles, with Macron's centrist party, *La République en Marche*, leading the way two populist parties on the left and the within the political landscape—I am referring, of course, to Mélenchon's *La France insoumise* and Le Pen's *Rassemblement national*.³⁹ Both of these parties, voicing skepticism over the European Union and calling for greater direct democracy, show that many are dissatisfied with the status quo of parliamentary politics.

While many in France are moving away from traditional parties, it is notable that some citizens have disengaged from the partisan system altogether. Electoral abstention has been on the rise since 2002, with only one in three voters casting a ballot in all three

³⁹ Marc Lazar, “Construction et déconstruction du système des partis,” in *La Ve démystifiée*, Académique (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2019), 145, <https://www.cairn.info/la-cinquieme-republique-demystifiee--9782724624557-p-137.htm>.

rounds of voting in 2017. The 2017 legislative elections, moreover, featured the highest abstention rate recorded since the beginning of the Fifth Republic, with 51.29% of voters not voting in the first round.⁴⁰ Perhaps more significant than abstention, however, has been the notable increase in *votes blancs*, or “white votes,” generally understood as protest votes. In the 2017 presidential election, 9% of voters cast blank ballots, which, combined with the percentage of abstention, resulted in more people rejecting the candidates than voting for the Marine Le Pen, the runner-up to the election.⁴¹

The implosion of the party system, high abstention rates, and the rise in white votes only speak to a broader malaise regarding the people’s relationship to the political system. Confidence levels in various political actors and institutions among the general population have plummeted to their lowest since the beginning of the Fifth Republic. According to the *Baromètre de confiance politique* from SciencesPo, in January 2018, only 33% of those polled had confidence in the President, 30% in the government, 29% in the Senate and the Assembly, and a dismal 9% in political parties.⁴² Unions, meanwhile, have not fared much better, registering 30% confidence in 2019.⁴³

Public Policy and Representation

The clear disaffection for many of the Fifth Republic’s institutions points to a widening “gap between the Fifth Republic’s institutional architecture and French

⁴⁰ Camille Renard, “Abstention: 50 Ans De Montée Vers Les Sommets,” France Culture (France Culture, June 19, 2017), <https://www.franceculture.fr/politique/abstention-50-ans-de-montee-vers-les-sommets>

⁴¹ Eliza Mackintosh, “A Record Number of French Voted for Nobody,” CNN (Cable News Network, May 8, 2017), <https://www.cnn.com/2017/05/08/europe/french-voters-spoiled-ballots-abstained/index.html>

⁴² Anne Muxel, “Et les citoyens dans tout cela?,” in *La Ve démystifiée*, Académique (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2019), 191, <https://www.cairn.info/la-cinquieme-republique-demystifiee--9782724624557-p-187.htm>.

⁴³ Bruno Cautrès, “Le soutien en demi-teinte des Français à la Cinquième République,” in *La Ve démystifiée*, Académique (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2019), 223, <https://www.cairn.info/la-cinquieme-republique-demystifiee--9782724624557-p-217.htm>.

society.”⁴⁴ To better understand why, we must turn towards the evolution of public policy over the last half century. A brief overview of France’s practices around public policy not only provides an illuminating frame of reference for understanding why a growing segment of the population does not identify with their mechanisms of representation, but also help us understand the nature of the *gilets jaunes*’ emergence.

After the second World War, the French government moved to a form of state planning which, through heavy industrialization, would usher the country into the prosperous era of the *trentes glorieuses*.⁴⁵ Given the instability of parliamentary politics under the Fourth Republic, there was a widely shared sentiment during this period that “...only the modern State was capable of carrying out the country’s long-term strategy of industrial modernization.”⁴⁶ To this end, the State transitioned to a new model of governance, initiated by the Monnet Plan of 1946, allowing it to create public policies for key economic sectors, as well as social issues, and pilot them permanently.⁴⁷ This entailed the creation of “framework laws,” which provided general orientations around which the State would continually produce new measures and tools, and were not subject to the normal rhythm of electoral politics—they “inscribed public policy within the time of the expert and the calendar of necessary continuity,” as opposed to “the clipped time of electoral jousts.”⁴⁸

Not only did this model intend to “liberate the administrative state from too much dependence vis-à-vis...the Parliament,” it also sought to “transform the forms of

⁴⁴ Francois, 42.

⁴⁵Chris Howell, "The French road to neoliberalism," in *Catalyst: A Journal of Theory and Strategy* (2018).

⁴⁶ Nicolas Roussellier, “Vers un divorce entre l’État et la démocratie? Les politiques publiques comme problème,” *Le Débat* 206, no. 4 (2019): 135, <https://doi.org/10.3917/deba.206.0129>.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 131.

participation and representation in society.”⁴⁹ By recourse to “commissions of modernization,” which united public servicemen, syndicalists, businessmen and representatives from diverse associations, the strong administrative state would also become the “consultative state,” integrating forms of popular representation within its decision-making processes.⁵⁰ In other words, the “benevolent State” compensated for the decline in parliamentary representation by creating a semblance democratic accessibility.⁵¹ This type of relationship was congruous with a vertical conception of power, evidenced by the willingness of Gaullist governments to continue the practice of integrating unions and associations within governance. It also seemed to sustain the perception that socially differentiated groups of individuals had the power to elaborate a collective existence.

Since the 1980s, however, there has been a profound shift in the way that the State engages in public policy. In effect, with the rise in power of global finance and France’s integration into the European Union, public decision-making has become increasingly decentralized. State actors now consult with other nations within international frameworks, and with global financial actors such as banking organizations.⁵² Public policy is now spread out across a growing list of actors. Incremental measures are continually monitored by “...an arsenal of accounting and statistical instruments...” that conform to a “transnational framework of evaluation,” and

⁴⁹ Pierre Rosanvallon, *Le Peuple Introuvable: Histoire de La Représentation Démocratique En France*, Bibliothèque Des Histoires (Paris: Gallimard, 1998), 321.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Roussellier, “Vers...”, 136.

⁵² Loïc Azoulai, “Chapitre 8. Le besoin d’État dans une société de besoins,” in *La Ve démystifiée*, Académique (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2019), 111, <https://www.cairn.info/la-cinquieme-republique-demystifiee--9782724624557-p-105.htm>.

are evaluated on the gap between “objectives and results.”⁵³ These instruments also serve to avoid incurring new debt. As a result, over the last forty years, the left and the right have shared “a bipartisan commitment to privatization, deregulation, and financialization.”⁵⁴

According to Nicolas Roussellier, the practice of evaluation “decouples” public policy from the expression of the national will.⁵⁵ With measures continually modified through expert opinion, it has become increasingly difficult to encounter the origin of the popular will in the process of public decision-making; governmental actions appear increasingly “...untouchable to a large part of the population; they are placed outside of the nation, outside of the people’s grasp and their capacity to express their will. It is, in a certain way, the backwards republic.”⁵⁶ Put differently, the “political moment” that connects the will of the people to state action has become less visible, “blurred,” as the decision-making process has become more and more complex.⁵⁷

The general sense of incomprehension has only been exacerbated by the gradual demise of unions and trade associations since the end of the *trentes glorieuses*—those which had previously been central to the creation of public policy now only play bit parts in consultation. The State, especially under the guise of Macron’s “start-up nation,” has tried to make up for their absence by attempting to empower both “agencies of the State” and “representatives of civil society” to act on its behalf and consult communities more directly and autonomously. But this multiplication of actors and responsibilities ends by

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Howell, “The French...,” 14.

⁵⁵ Roussellier, “Vers...”, 137..

⁵⁶ Ibid., 129.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 131.

muddling its message: The consultative state not only appears unable to articulate “its own responsibility, its primary and central role in the process of making decisions,” but also incapable of clearly expressing their relationship to the people whom they are for.⁵⁸ This is why a growing part of the French population—perceiving public policy as a sphere of politics separate from their lived experiences—feel completely shut out of the process.

The Response of the Gilets Jaunes

In large part, it is this general feeling of helplessness, provoked by the complexity and opaqueness of public policy, which impels the *gilets jaunes* to take to the streets. After all, the measure at the origin of their protests—an increase in the gas tax—came as the inevitable conclusion of a “cascade of [public policy] decisions” set in motion by the orientation set by the 2015 energy transition law, and even the 2007 “Grenelle de l’Environnement,” a multi-party debate on environmental issues.⁵⁹ These decisions were based on recommendations and objectives set by the UN and then the European Union, deliberated over the course of two presidential *quinquennats*, and finally implemented by Macron’s government in November of 2018. The “authors” of the decision were unclear, especially to the average citizen, who did not understand why there needed to a gas tax increase at a time when gas prices were already high.⁶⁰ Nevertheless, the *gilets jaunes* made the connection that the measure was part of a broader trend of decisions being made without their input, and that additionally, the State itself was not in complete command; the widespread perception was that “neither the people nor the French

⁵⁸ Ibid., 133.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 131.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

government controlled their destiny.”⁶¹ The protesters felt that no matter what they did, the cards were already played: President Macron could not justify the tax, and the “traditional partners of the State” could not represent or defend their immediate needs and concerns.

In response to their inability to locate themselves within the processes of decision-making, nor identify with any intermediary of the State, the *gilets jaunes* have taken matters into their own hands. Particularly, to the complexity of public policy they oppose their “anti-public-policy” measure: the RIC, the citizen initiative referendum, where citizens are able to trigger a referendum at the local or national level if they gather enough signatures *à propos* a given subject. Whereas the world of public policy demands that everything must usually pass through “consultation, expertise, and parliamentary debate,” the RIC does not demand any form of intermediation—in the direct referendum, the distance between the citizen and the decision-making process collapses.⁶² It constitutes the way that “the people takes back speech and seizes power once more.”⁶³ For Roussellier, then, their rejection of intermediary bodies can be thought as reflecting a desire to recover a popular sovereignty that had been lost within the byzantine processes of public decision-making.

Other researchers, however, see the embrace of the RIC, as well as other instruments of direct democracy, as illuminating another possible motivation behind the protests. Political scientist Luc Rouban, in his book *La matière noire de la démocratie* [“The Dark Matter of Democracy”], points to a growing cleavage in French society

⁶¹ Ibid., 133.

⁶² Ibid., 140.

⁶³Ibid.

between the “winners” and “losers” of globalization—those who are social autonomous and those who are not. In this context, calls for direct democracy do not necessarily originate from the desire for popular power to be shared equally amongst all citizens; rather, it stems from an increasingly “instrumental” conception of democracy that sees current forms of institutional intermediation as “inefficient,” “without immediate results,” and “not rewarding” enough of their own individual efforts—hence their calls for increased buying power.⁶⁴ Using polling data, he proposes that the *gilets jaunes* effectively correspond with the emergence of a new kind of democratic subject, the “citizen as consumer,” who envisages citizenship not as “participation with an open public space” but rather as a “fiscal investment,” a way of getting access to economic resources.⁶⁵ Rouban attributes this development to the idea that “financial capitalism has finished by...[pushing] towards the undifferentiation of structures of power, a confusion between the public and the private, the reduction of the social tie to a protocol where everything must be able to be commercialized.”⁶⁶ More simply put, the *gilets jaunes* signal a general disidentification with the constitutional regime’s current mechanisms of representation because its members subscribe to a different understanding of democracy—democracy as access.

As such, Rouban’s theorization closely echoes Wendy Brown’s discussion around neoliberal rationality and its “remaking of the people.” She proposes that neoliberalism “configures the state as the manager of a firm and the subject as a unit of entrepreneurial and self-investing capital...”, and subsequently transposes “...the meaning and practice

⁶⁴ Luc Rouban, *La Matière Noire de La Démocratie*, Nouveaux Débats (Paris: SciencesPo Les presses, 2019), 1195.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 1305.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 2040.

of democratic concerns with equality, freedom, and sovereignty from a political to an economic register.”⁶⁷ The political and the social spheres are “economized.” In so doing, neoliberal rationality produces a new subject, one that sees the world through economic idiom rather than through the lens of sovereignty. Rouban’s imagined subject, shaped by France’s transition to neoliberal governance (evidenced by the shift in public policy), appears to share these characteristics.

Nevertheless, Rouban’s analysis seems to neglect a crucial aspect of the *gilets jaunes* movement—their recurrent and conspicuous claims to incarnate “the people,” and the transformative effects that these may induce. Indeed, as much as neoliberal rationality molds its subjects, those who make claims to “the people” also produce new subjectivities, new ways of being and doing. With a focus on this generative capacity, the next chapter will dive into the ways in which the *gilets jaunes* makes claims to “the people” as a means of better understanding the ways in which they not only might recover, but also reconfigure, popular sovereignty.

⁶⁷ Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution*, First Edition (New York: Zone Books, 2015), 41.

Chapter II: Reconceptualizing “Le Peuple”

In the previous chapter, I identify how a specific appearance or figure of “the people” and popular sovereignty emerges out the Fifth Republic’s myriad institutional and constitutional practices. But as Judith Butler observes, popular sovereignty never finds full translation through the nation’s mechanisms of representation—the “people” of a constitution can never be fully contained.⁶⁸ For Jason Frank, as well as other democratic theorists, this derives from the fact that the term “the people” carries with it a “constitutive surplus”: “the people are forever a people that is not... yet.”⁶⁹ As a consequence, there is always space for interpretation for “who” and “how” the people are, not only by those in power, but by those who make claims to be “the people.” Given that the people are a “constituent and constituted power,” this chapter looks at how the *gilets jaunes* invoke the people, and how this claim gets enacted through a series of discursive speech acts across different stages, the weekly protests and the occupation of roundabouts.⁷⁰ Through their actions in each of these environments, they not only respond to the aforementioned deficits of representation, but they also produce a new appearance of a future people who are not yet, on which they ground the authority of their claims.

⁶⁸ Judith Butler. "We, the people: thoughts on Freedom of Assembly." *A. Badiou, et al. What is a people* (2016).

⁶⁹ Jason A Frank, *Constituent Moments: Enacting the People in Postrevolutionary America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 6.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

“Constituent Moments” and “Staging the People”

In order to better understand how the *gilets jaunes* make their claims, I mainly employ the concepts of two theorists, Jason Frank and Jacques Rancière. I also briefly draw from Judith Butler, specifically with regards to the physical enactment of popular sovereignty.

Though Jason Frank’s work focuses on democratic phenomena within the United States in the post-revolutionary era, his concept of “constituent moments” is particularly useful for my analysis. These occur “...when the underauthorized—imposters, radicals, self-created entities—seize the mantle of authorization, changing the inherited rules of authorization in the process.” Consequently, they “...invent a new political space and make apparent a people that are productively never at one with themselves.”⁷¹

Importantly, Frank conceives of constituent moments as not only occurring in the extraordinary instances like constitutional crises, but also “in the fabric of everyday political speech and action;” and through “ritual actions,” not formal law or legal procedure.⁷² At times, the *gilets jaunes*’ protests have gotten close to provoking a constitutional crisis; however, their protests are primarily characterized by sustained action on a daily and weekly basis, scattered around the entirety of France. Thus, to analyze their movement as enacting a series of “constituent moments” appears fitting—it allows for analysis which looks at the movement’s “micropolitical enactments” of popular sovereignty.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid., 33.

Jacques Rancière's concept of "staging dissensus," moreover, gives us an additional framework for understanding the generative capacity of these constituent moments. He argues that the scandal at the heart of politics is that within the whole of a political order, there always exist those "without a part," who are not recognized as "speaking beings."⁷³ The crux of democratic politics, then, lies in the creation of new political subjects who exist the interval of common identities (like "the people") and who enact "demonstration[s] proper to politics": the simultaneous argument and "opening up of a common world" in which that argument can be heard or recognized—the world where those who previously did not have a part nor a voice are now recognized as legitimate interlocutors with those do have a part.⁷⁴ The "paradoxical *mise-en-scène*," in other words, interrupts the current political order by setting up the "contradiction of two worlds within a single world."⁷⁵ This interruption is a productive event; Rancière states that it "decomposes and recomposes the relationships between the ways of *doing*, of *being*, and of *saying* that define the perceptible organization of the community." By looking at how the *gilets jaunes* invent and stage their disputes with the government, we can also think of how they reconfigure relations of sovereignty between the people and the State.

Making the People Visible

Weekly mass protests have made the *gilets jaunes* impossible to ignore: each Saturday, in cities and towns all over France, bright yellow vests pour into the streets,

⁷³ Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 11.

⁷⁴ 56.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 55.

accompanied by loud chants and waving flags. While all the protests differ in location and composition, these all nonetheless take part under the banner of the same events, the “*Actes*,” chapters in a performance which continues to grow longer.⁷⁶ Intentionally or not, this theatrical language indicates how these protests are effectively a stage for the *gilets jaunes* to enact claims to another people than the one currently conceived by the current constitutional regime. Directly confronting the forces of order in locations of power, the *gilets jaunes* transform into actors or agents who are in direct dialogue with the State. And through the act of gathering and speaking, those who did not feel as though they had a voice under the institutions of the Fifth Republic are able to make their diverse needs heard and understood. The protests, in other words, are spaces in which constituent moments appear.

While the collective fluorescence of the vests creates the impression of a vast sea of bodies, closer inspection reveals a highly particularized form of expression. On the back of the vests, one can find personalized inscriptions, shared slogans, even elaborate political cartoons. Some vests are used to recount members’ personal struggles with economic precarity, such as a vest photographed during Acte 14 in Paris, which read: “I have a salary of €1200/overdraft from the 6 of the month/looking for a job.”⁷⁷ Meanwhile, some vests are used the protests’ membership to certain professions, subgroups of the movement, or even with groups that have allied themselves with the *gilets jaunes*’ cause, like the *Comité Adama*, a racial justice group. Other vests yet address President Macron and his government with lists of demands of all kinds: the instauration of the RIC, the reestablishing of the wealth tax, pleas for environmental

⁷⁶ The recent outbreak of Covid-19 has put the *gilets jaunes* on hiatus, however.

⁷⁷ *Plein le Dos*

action. All of these enunciations are incredibly diverse, even at times conflicting. Yet taken altogether, these outcries and demands can be seen as taking inventory of a world growing increasingly precarious and unequal in distribution.

It is in the act of protesting that singular expressions of suffering get transmuted into the collective acknowledgement of injustice and articulated under the name of a common political subject. Although protesters call themselves the “*gilets jaunes*,” they also make numerous claims to the “*peuple*.” More than merely representing this mythical mass, however, they assert that they actually “are” the people. For Judith Butler, these claims constitute an act of “reflexive self-making,” which is “not the same as any form of representation.”⁷⁸ Effectively, through the protesters’ speech acts and “performative enactments,” popular sovereignty “declares itself” as existing outside of the electoral power while simultaneously establishing itself as the authorizing source of power for the entire political order.⁷⁹

According to Butler, the physical act of gathering itself can already be seen as an implicit claim to this authority, yet the *gilets jaunes* go further by verbally and symbolically reiterating these claims through diverse forms of articulation and elements of mise-en-scène. For instance, various slogans evoking popular sovereignty accompany the demands on the back of the vests: “the power of the people, for the people,” “the people are angry,” “the people against the elites;” just to name a few.⁸⁰ Some claims are made with direct references to France’s foundational text—a banner in Nîmes from Acte 6 directly cites Article 35 of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, which

⁷⁸ Butler, “We...,” 52.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁸⁰ For more examples, visit *Plein le Dos*

authorizes the insurrection of the people in the case that the State violates their rights.⁸¹ Meanwhile, French revolutionary historian Sophie Wahnich remarks that revolutionary language and imagery are frequently evoked by the *gilets jaunes*: the Phrygian cap is a common sight, and many protesters join in singing the *Marseillaise*.⁸² But these are not used with the intention of establishing “pure” image of the people in the nationalist vein; rather, Ludivine Bantigny posits that they are primarily evoked to lend legitimacy and authorize their demands.⁸³

The recurrence to the authorizing claim to the constitutional people can be seen as part of establishing a common stage with the representative institutions of the Fifth Republic. In effect, by making references to the constitutionally legitimating people, the *gilets jaunes* create a dispute around “who” is this figure, and how this figure is to find expression. Against the passive appearance of the tacitly complying people of the Fifth Republic, they oppose their own appearance: directly in contact with the structures of governance, participating personally in the political process. In other words, they indirectly establish themselves as interlocutors with those who carry out the constitution.

The *gilets jaunes* do not only resort to using the past to reconfigure their appearance. Dennis Saint-Amand observes that the *gilets jaunes*’ speech acts react to “a precise ensemble of elements (measures, actions, political decisions, speeches).”⁸⁴ To President Macron’s announcement of the *Grand Débat National*—the direct consultation

⁸¹ Ludivine Bantigny, “Un événement,” in *Le Fond de l’air Est Jaune: Comprendre Une Révolte Inédite* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2019), 54.

⁸² Sophie Wahnich, “Sans-culottes et gilets jaunes,” in *Le Fond de l’air Est Jaune: Comprendre Une Révolte Inédite* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2019), 41.

⁸³ Bantigny, 55.

⁸⁴ Denis Saint-Amand, ““ Parce Que C’est Notre Rejet ” : Poétique Des Gilets Jaunes,” AOC media - Analyse Opinion Critique, July 29, 2019, <https://aoc.media/analyse/2019/07/30/parce-que-cest-notre-rejet-poetique-des-gilets-jaunes/>

of citizens by the government in response to the protests—they respond dialogically by declaring “The grand debate is in the streets.”⁸⁵ Or in reference to President Macron’s speech that he would unite France by saying “*parce-que c’est notre projet*” [because it is our project], the *gilets jaunes* intervene with “*parce-que c’est notre rejet*” [because it is our rejection].⁸⁶ Through these speech acts, the protesters demonstrate that they understand full well what the government is saying and doing, and creatively put forward their own take on the situation—put differently, they stage dissensus. Once more, they offer in the process the appearance of a people that is far from passive and submissive; they are active participants in the realm of political discussion.

Moreover, by repeatedly invoking their opposition to specific public policy measures, they forcefully extend their presence into a world to which they previously did not belong. If, according to Rancière, the current democratic struggle can be resumed in part to be the “struggle against the privatization of the public sphere,” the *gilets jaunes* can be thought as bringing recognition to those “relegated by State law to the private life of inferior beings.”⁸⁷ They make evident their capacity as speaking beings to have a say in the political process, and do so in a way that is unmediated. By creatively twisting and negating the declarations of their opponents, they counter the State’s logic of governance with their own. In a radio interview on the subject of the *gilets jaunes*, Rancière asserts the very existence of such a confrontation: on one side, there are those who govern

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Jacques Rancière and Steve Corcoran, *Hatred of Democracy*, Paperback edition (London: Verso, 2009), 54.

according to a fixed agenda with their various long-term plans, and on the other, those without a real program but with non-negotiable demands.⁸⁸

This aspect of non-negotiability does not only reside in turns of phrases, but also translates to how the protests play out within physical space. It is striking that the protests have been carried out in a manner that is much different from past social movement: Samuel Hayat effectively notes that “the rules of protest, long established, are ignored: there are no corteges, no legal representatives, no negotiated paths...”⁸⁹ Spaces that were generally off-limits to social movements, like the *Champs-Élysées* and the *Arc de Triomphe*, are vandalized, occupied. The protesters do not get permits from the government, and do not stay within the squares normally prescribed to them.⁹⁰ In this sense, they physically reject the logic of any form of State mediation. Not only do they move through space on their own accord, but they impose their own space on the State, instead of the other way around. After all, in their relationship with the State, they are the ones who have authority, the ones who actively decide.

Occupying the Roundabouts and Finding Structure

The act of inscribing a contradictory world within physical space has not only been reserved to weekly protests. For a time, the *gilets jaunes* all around France occupied roundabouts, building structures in which they would convene for daily assemblies.

Sociologists Bernard Floris and Luc Gwiazdzinski have noted that these occupations

⁸⁸ Guillemin Rodary, “Jacques Rancière Sur Les Gilets Jaunes,” Club de Mediapart, January 21, 2019, <https://blogs.mediapart.fr/guillemin-rodary/blog/200119/jacques-ranciere-sur-les-gilets-jaunes>

⁸⁹ Samuel Hayat, “L’économie morale et le pouvoir,” in *Le Fond de l’air Est Jaune: Comprendre Une Révolte Inédite* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2019), 18.

⁹⁰ Bantigny, 52.

evoke the image of a “little theatre that is replayed in permanence.”⁹¹ Always visible, yet separate from any institutional ties, the roundabouts served as another stage on which popular sovereignty may be expressed.

The roundabout emerged in France in the 1980s as a direct consequence of decentralized State power.⁹² It quickly became, however, a “sacrificed space,” a “non-location” purely meant for streamlining traffic circulation. It is a symbol, in other words, of a public space that is not really meant for the public, that has, in a sense, been privatized. Yet from the very beginnings of their protests, the *gilets jaunes* colonized the circular plots for themselves, turning them into living spaces, communal life.⁹³ By interrupting the “normal affection” of this seemingly ordinary space, the roundabouts engaged in the same kind of activity as the protests, but in a more sustained fashion: they allowed protesters to impose their own space onto space that was supposedly defined by the government.

Just like the weekly protests, the roundabouts were all slightly different in how they were occupied: on some entire cabins were built (like in Commercy), on others there were simply picnic tables. In general, however, they all shared the aspect of providing members a space where they could sit, eat, and discuss. The structures were marked by a distinctly “handy” visual identity; of course, everything on the roundabout had to come from somewhere else. And with this flexibility of form came the flexibility of usage: the roundabout could be adapted to fit a wide range of activities, from protests on Saturday to

⁹¹ Bernard Floris and Luc Gwiazdzinski, eds., *Sur La Vague Jaune: L'utopie d'un Rond-Point* (Grenoble: Elya éditions, 2019), 30..

⁹² Marion Dupont, “Petite Histoire Du Rond-Point Et De Ses Usages Politiques,” *Le Monde.fr* (Le Monde, February 1, 2019), https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2019/02/01/petite-histoire-du-rond-point-et-de-ses-usages-politiques_5417511_3232.html

⁹³ Bernard Floris and Luc Gwiazdzinski, 30.

painting workshops on other days.⁹⁴ For Rancière, the roundabout occupations provided a space where time could slow down, and which allowed one to take distance from the normal order of things and its “accelerated time.”⁹⁵

Within these new spacial-temporal contexts, the roundabouts became pedagogical sites of intense deliberation and political education. The roundabout in Crolles, for instance, had formal debates over questions of the RIC and retirement, as part of a series called “*Les Vrais Débats*” [The Real Debates] supposed to mimic the government’s “*Grand Débat National*.”⁹⁶ Like the Democratic-Republican societies that Jason Frank analyzes in *Constituent Moments*, these roundabouts “...created spaces where...constituencies could be interpellated into a political world without being interpellated into a juridical order.”⁹⁷ They could become “speaking beings” without having to integrate within the structures of the State. Moreover, they allowed for concrete deliberation over needs and desires, even if they had no real power in actually implementing real solutions.

Finally, the roundabouts created a space of political organization that broke with the hierarchical governance structures so firmly ingrained within French politics. A near totality of the roundabouts had no auto-proclaimed spokespersons or designated leaders. Decisions about day-to-day operations were made on the basis of consensus.⁹⁸ But perhaps most significant of all is that all decisions made at the Assemblies would have to be resubmitted to the roundabouts for deliberation and approval. Here, the roundabout

⁹⁴ Ibid., 34.

⁹⁵ Jacques Rancière, “Les Vertus De L’inexplicable – à Propos Des “Gilets Jaunes”,” AOC media - Analyse Opinion Critique, January 7, 2019, <https://aoc.media/opinion/2019/01/08/vertus-de-linexplicable-a-propos-gilets-jaunes/>

⁹⁶ Floris and Gwiazdzinski, 172.

⁹⁷ Frank, 153.

⁹⁸ Floris and Gwiazdzinski, 182.

occupations broke fundamentally with the logic of representation under the Fifth Republic; the delegation of powers was only temporary, the results always coming back to the collective of individuals for final ratification. The practice embodied another way of thinking about popular sovereignty, another appearance of the people in total divergence from the way in which the Fifth Republic imagined them.

Conclusion

The dilemma at the heart of the Declaration of Rights of Man and Citizen has not been resolved, as the preeminent author of the Fifth Republic would have hoped, but that is not necessarily a scandal to be deplored. In truth, the ambiguous gap which opposes the abstract, passive citizen and the concrete, figured man provides a space for creative reinvention through powerful acts of demonstration, as exemplified by the *gilets jaunes*. Their protests reveal that the concept of popular sovereignty has not completely slipped away from the political vocabulary, despite gradual encroachment from a form of neoliberal governance which increasingly shuts out the people from decision-making process entirely. Furthermore, they show that making claims to the people is a powerful form of political contestation able of reconfiguring the ways in which citizens think of themselves in relation to their governors.

There had already been signs that the Fifth Republic was standing on its last legs; the appearance of the *gilets jaunes* only make this clearer. But the appearance of the *gilets jaunes* is a cause for optimism. At a time when it appears as though the people are more distant from deciding their political destinies as ever, their movement provides us with a form of contention that appears effective for not only interrupting the system, but for shaping new subjectivities, new forms of existence which can—and hopefully will—continue to disrupt the political order in ways that prove more equitable and just than what we have now.

Appendix



Figure 1: A protester in Paris during Acte 6.

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