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## THE FRENCH INSURGENCY

### *Political Economy of the Gilets Jaunes*

**L**IKE ALL MOVEMENTS endowed with the force of an event, the revolt of the Yellow Vests in France was both predicted and unexpected. Predicted not only by the eternal prophets of a coming insurrection, or the minatory rhetoric of a Le Pen, but at the summits of the political system. Macron himself didn't hesitate to appropriate the title *Révolution* for the book that launched his 2017 presidential campaign. Two years earlier, the political-intellectual fixer Jacques Attali, now an intimate of Macron, had warned that the disintegrating political landscape under Hollande would leave France 'lurching towards a pre-revolutionary situation'. Long anticipated, then, but nevertheless a surprise: not only the timing and the initial trigger of the revolt—Macron's diesel tax—but its concrete social configurations were entirely unforeseen.

The Gilets Jaunes movement has seen the irruption of a new social actor, rising from the most 'invisibilized' layers of French society, hitherto stymied in political passivity: the blue- or white-collar working class of small or medium enterprises; fractions of the petty bourgeoisie without college education, close (spatially and socially) to the popular classes; pensioners from the same layers. Operating outside the established forms of political representation or trade-union organizing, the Gilets Jaunes movement has brought together waged workers and the self-employed on the only terrain its organic composition would permit: a protest against the state. Whence the second surprise: a protest largely

composed of poorly paid wage-earners that has taken its stand on the slippery ground of taxation; for lower taxes, and especially against the diesel tax, but also against fiscal injustice and Macron's abolition of the wealth tax. And yet—the third surprise—the discussions on the occupied roundabouts of the 'impossible' end-of-the-month, the evidence of millions of lives laid to waste by the daily constraints and humiliations of the exploited, served to shatter the image of the 'start-up nation' that Macron was trying to impose.

Finally, fourth surprise, the movement has managed to sustain a high level of popular support throughout its months-long confrontation with the state, even though it has faced escalating levels of police repression and has taken an occasionally riotous turn.<sup>1</sup> It has succeeded, where so many other French protests of the past decades—the pension and labour-law struggles, *banlieue* riots, students' strikes, *Nuit Debout*—have failed, in extracting concessions from the government, even if these have been largely symbolic. In NLR 115, Didier Fassin and Anne-Claire Defossez counterposed the narrative of the Yellow Vests' rise to the Bourbon-esque arrogance and unprecedented police violence of the Macron presidency. This contribution will concentrate instead on the subjective politics of the *Gilets Jaunes*, which cannot be disassociated from their objective conditions. Politically speaking: of what is yellow the colour?

### *Repertoires of meaning*

Breaking with the stock routines of the unions and the left, the Yellow Vests' tactics—occupying roundabouts, confronting the police—fired the enthusiasm of the anarcho-autonomist sectors that played a highly visible role in the French protests of spring 2016 and 2018. Yet the discursive and symbolic repertoire that made the Yellow Vests so visible operated in a different range. An identification as 'plebeian', 'of the people', turning its back at once on the established workers' movement and the 'culture of knowledge', combined with the omnipresence of the *tricolore* and renditions of the *Marseillaise*, spoke rather to Mélenchon's 'populism of the left'—or indeed, the populism of the far right. Others have read the growing predominance of private-sector employees among the 'people of the roundabouts' as premonition of an 'anti-bourgeois

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<sup>1</sup> In late March 2019, a survey in *Le Figaro* found 53 per cent of respondents still expressing support or sympathy for the Yellow Vests, although this was down from earlier levels: 'Gilets Jaunes: le soutien des Français en chute (sondage)', *Figaro*, 20 March 2019.

bloc', or placed the movement within the *longue durée* of French popular struggles, running from the early modern anti-tax or 'fair price' uprisings to the *sans-culottes*—the latter justified by the Yellow Vests' striking recourse to the symbolism of the Great Revolution, from the model guillotine rolled out for Macron to a scattering of Phrygian bonnets. The important role of women has rightly been noted.<sup>2</sup>

Each well founded, as far as they go, these interpretations express different facets of the movement. Their limitation flows from the same source as their (relative) pertinence: their unilateral character effectively excludes anything that doesn't fit their analytical grid. Anachronisms apart, the *longue durée* of the historians is a purely national one; illuminating as this may be—there is an incontestably French dimension to the legitimacy of direct popular action that goes back to the foundational moment of the 1789 Revolution—it risks excluding the more recent past, as well as international comparisons with other trans-class anti-austerity protests. While the adherents of left populism may rejoice at a movement that presents itself as the incarnation of the French people, the Gilets Jaunes' mode of action is the polar opposite of the ballot-box 'citizens' revolution' as envisaged by Mélenchon and La France insoumise.

As for the far right, it has grounds for thinking that the Yellow Vest demand for the 'renationalization' of the social contract represents acceptance of Le Pen's 'national preference'. Sociological surveys confirm that a section of the movement at least fears an immigration 'crisis'; in one, some 48 per cent of those questioned thought that a French citizen should have priority over an immigrant in matters of employment.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, it's striking that anti-immigrant demands as such are barely audible within the movement, by comparison with the emphasis put on 'justice' and the redistribution of wealth. In fact, the Gilets Jaunes

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<sup>2</sup> Bruno Amable, 'Vers un bloc antiburgeois?', *Libération*, 26 November 2018; Vincent Présumey, 'Du prolétariat et des populistes', *Mediapart*, 13 January 2019; Gérard Noiriel, 'Les GJ replacent la question sociale au centre du jeu politique', *Le Monde*, 27 November 2018; Sophie Wahnich, 'La structure des mobilisations actuelles correspond à celle des sans-culottes', *Mediapart*, 4 December 2018; Vincent Bilem, 'Pourquoi la place des femmes dans le mouvement des gilets jaunes fait-elle tant polémique?', *Les Inrockuptibles*, 17 December 2018 [Amable and Wahnich in English on Verso blog].

<sup>3</sup> See the investigation by Yann Le Lann and his colleagues at Quantité Critique, discussed with Sylvia Zappi in 'Le mouvement des "gilets jaunes" est avant tout une demande de revalorisation du travail', *Le Monde*, 25 December 2018 [in English on Verso blog].

mark a break in the history of French social mobilizations. This is the first time that a movement ‘from below’ has seen the participation of both left and right. Yet the symmetry is deceptive: the ‘left of the left’ and the far right are pushing in opposite directions. At stake in the coming period is the decision between the two: a turn against the social forces responsible for inequalities and injustice, or against immigration. The rulers have already made their choice: Macron has pointedly included the question of immigration quotas in his ‘great debate’.

### *Organic crisis*

This unprecedented configuration can best be understood in the context of the intensification of the organic crisis that has been advancing through the French social order for some time. Arguably, its first signs appeared when the Socialist Party incumbent, Jospin, failed to make it into the second round of the presidential election in 2002, signalling the derailment of the process of bipartisan alternation. The concept of the organic crisis, formulated by Gramsci in the 1930s, has served to orient a number of analyses of the recent conjuncture. Here it will suffice to recall that Gramsci was referring to a radical rupture in the links between representatives and the represented. A collapse in support for the traditional parties may be the most visible symptom of an organic crisis, but it extends throughout the mediating organizations of civil society. Though its expressions will vary, it essentially involves a crisis of hegemony of the dominant class, the breakdown of its ability to maintain its leading role within the social formation—in other words, a generalized failure of consent.<sup>4</sup>

Gramsci distinguishes this from a revolutionary crisis, which is characterized by a qualitative rise in the activity of the masses, forming a collective will in opposition to the ruling bloc—a situation of dual power. By contrast, an organic crisis appears at a moment when the subordinate classes have shown their incapacity to polarize the situation in their favour. Typically, their response to the crisis is uneven—as Gramsci put it: they are not all capable of orienting themselves equally swiftly, or with

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<sup>4</sup> See in particular Antonio Gramsci, ‘Observations on Certain Aspects of the Structure of Political Parties in Periods of Organic Crisis’, in Geoffrey Nowell Smith and Quintin Hoare, eds, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, London 1971, pp. 210–8. Gramscian conceptions also underlie the stimulating essay by Bruno Amable and Stefano Palombarini, *L’illusion du ‘bloc bourgeois’*, Paris 2017.

the same rhythm. Meanwhile, despite their weakened hegemony, the traditional ruling classes still have important reserves at their disposal: the coercive and bureaucratic apparatuses of the state, as well as its intellectual strata—‘intellectual’ in the Gramscian sense, denominating also technical expertise and leadership capacity. The organic crisis unleashes a recomposition of political personnel, which can take diverse forms—from a Bonapartism, preserving the parliamentary façade, to the various Caesarisms and the ‘state of exception’—aiming to resolve the situation in the interests of the dominant bloc. The field is therefore open to solutions of force, represented by Gramsci’s ‘men of providence’.

Within this framework, the Macron project represented an attempt to resolve the crisis through a ‘bourgeois Bonapartism’, operating within the institutions of the existing regime. The glittering rise of an ‘outsider’, barely known to the public before his presidential run in 2017, was a phenomenon Gramsci would have recognized. But after forcing through executive decrees on the labour code and the railways, Macron’s Bonapartism collided with the *Gilets Jaunes*. Given the powerlessness of traditional social mobilizations, especially the unions, this was a brutal reminder of the vulnerabilities of the ruling class: the social bloc that actively supports neoliberal restructuring in France is in a clear minority, its champion owing his success at the ballot box to the extraordinary fluidity of the political scene in the spring of 2017—the collapse of the centre left under Hollande’s presidency, the media hue-and-cry against Fillon as the candidate of the centre right, the counter-mobilizing effects of Le Pen’s 20 per cent. The Yellow Vests were limited in number, but representative in their social composition and their message. They embodied the electoral abstention of the popular classes that has been at the root of the crisis sapping the party system in France for over twenty years. This is also why a relatively low level of mobilization could not only garner such a significant amount of support from the population but sustain it, despite the unprecedented intensity of police violence used against the Yellow Vests—and indeed, the counter-violence of some of the demonstrators, actually putting the state on the defensive.

The neoliberal radicalization unleashed by Macron’s election had, in fact, only deepened the crisis of hegemony it was intended to resolve. The threshold crossed in the repressive crackdown, of an intensity unseen since the Algerian war, against a background of latent insubordination within the security apparatus—see the well-placed leaks concerning

the ‘Benalla affair’—and defections from the President’s team, are evidence of a worsening crisis of the state. Macron’s ‘Jupiterian’ image of unstoppable progress and untouchable authority, mobilized precisely as a solution to that crisis, has been shattered. In this sense, Macron’s neo-liberal modernization project has been still-born—and no alternative, capable of consolidating a socio-political majority, has taken shape.

### *Contradictions within ‘the people’*

Turning to the political subjectivity of the Yellow Vests themselves: one of the most striking features is that, despite the lack of pre-existing organizational structures, and with social media and informal local contacts their only resource, the movement has been able to establish itself on a national scale and with an impressive consistency in its modalities of action and in the sort of demands it has raised at each turning point. Contrary to media perceptions, these are not a random grab-bag of mutually contradictory claims. The movement is organized on the basis of social and political demands that have virtually unanimous support among the active participants. As well as the referendum at citizens’ initiative (RIC), these have included the restoration of the wealth tax (ISF), raising the minimum wage (SMIC), cancelling the hike in fuel taxes, increasing pensions, lowering direct taxes, hiking corporation tax, supporting small local businesses, restructuring the salaries of elected representatives and an end to the off-shoring of jobs. The list, and above all the order of priorities, may vary across the country; we should also note the much longer and more heterogeneous enumeration of 42 demands published in December 2018. But what emerges very clearly is the emphasis on unanimity as a constitutive feature of the movement.

All social movements put forward unifying demands, of course, as their founding gesture and the condition of their success. The unanimity of the Gilets Jaunes is of a different order; it arises from a dimension of their identity. In the absence of structured spaces for deliberation, demands are adopted by ‘acclamation’, or by its social-media equivalent. Moreover, the Gilets Jaunes don’t conceive of themselves as a movement; their tactics aren’t aimed at drawing in broader layers—there is a notable lack of interest in expanding the movement to other sectors—because they ‘are’ the people. And ‘the people’ can only be unanimous. The rejection of political representation and of all forms of mediation is counterposed to the presentness, the immediacy and the supposed transparency enabled

by social media and informal acquaintance networks. The use of national symbols needs to be situated within this outlook. Singing the *Marseillaise* on Yellow Vest marches owes much to the football stadium, as Sophie Wahnich has noted: ‘It’s a way of being together, singing in unison, the joy of the mass chorus. It produces the crowd effect, in the traditional sense of the term. It creates links between people, making each one feel stronger. If football didn’t exist, if people only learnt it in school, the *Marseillaise* wouldn’t be used like this.’<sup>5</sup>

Such a usage is ambivalent by definition. The *Marseillaise* is a revolutionary song from the days of 1792, a symbolic validation of a popular uprising against an unjust and illegitimate power; but sung in today’s context, it may equally express a claim for *francité*—Frenchness. The ‘people’ embodied in the Gilets Jaunes can only assert itself as a national population, asking that the French state respect the social contract and thus become the people’s state—the state of the people of France. It also expresses the desire for a national homogeneity that would rise above the divisions—seen as artificial or undesirable—of partisan attachments or of class and race. In other words, the contradictory character of the movement may not consist so much in its juxtaposition of incompatible demands as in its desire to repress contradictions, its refusal to deal with them—which may risk the denial of its own properly political dimension.

That hypothesis needs to be qualified, however, first by a closer investigation of the movement’s internal dynamics, including the attempt at national coordination represented by the ‘assembly of assemblies’ in January 2019; and second, by examining its articulation of the economic and the political—or, more precisely: the broaching of its central economic demands through a political framework, centred on the role of the state in social reproduction. A deeper analysis of these two aspects should aim to go beyond what is often a limitation in left (and other) interpretations of popular movements: focusing on what they are *not*. The risk of such ‘negative’ analyses lies in their normative dimension—usually implicit, and therefore all the more insidious—which tends to produce moralizing rejections or, alternatively, idealizations of the agitation in question. Yet every important social movement invites reflection both on its novelties, its irreducible and unprecedented features, and on the ways in which it

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<sup>5</sup> Sophie Wahnich, ‘La structure des mobilisations actuelles’.

interacts with the objective ‘givens’ of its situation: institutions, social and political forces, ideological formations and discourses.

The aim, then, is to investigate both the practice of the movement—the representations it generates, the goals it sets itself—and its effects upon the overall balance of the conjuncture. Notwithstanding the limits of the form, a historical analogy may help to clarify the relation between socio-economic and political demands. The Chartist movement that rocked early industrial England in the 1830s and 40s, organized round the demand for ‘universal’ male suffrage, rested upon a sort of ‘popular political economy’ that addressed socio-economic questions from a primarily political angle, its first objective being to combat the institutionalized exclusion of the popular classes by a liberal representative system dominated by the landowning elite. The analogy will allow us to go beyond approaches defined by the mooted ‘populism’ of the *Gilets Jaunes*, to ask whether the movement represents a form of struggle against the ‘de-democratization’ driven by neoliberal capitalism—and accelerated by the sharpening of its organic crisis.

### *Why Commercy?*

The call for an ‘assembly of assemblies’ came from the *Gilets Jaunes* of Commercy, a small town in north-eastern France. In late January 2019, delegations from around seventy groups duly met in the next-door village of Sorcy-Saint-Martin and approved a set of demands and principles. Why was it that the call for a national gathering of *Gilets Jaunes* emanated from this small town in the Lorraine, with no particular political weight or revolutionary traditions? In many respects the Commercy group seems typical of the Yellow Vest movement. Its militants are predominantly drawn from the popular classes, both salaried and manual workers, with a significant fraction of the self-employed, local-government employees and retired people. There is a strong sense of collective identity, developed among a group of people that have got to know each other in the course of months of joint activity. The same demands have emerged here as elsewhere: taxes, social and fiscal justice, the RIC—even if there may be a stronger emphasis than usual on the social. Commercy itself seems equally typical. Marked by an industrial and military past—the present German border lies some 50 kilometres to the east—its population of 5,600 is in decline, down from 7,000-plus in the 1970s. Like most of the region, it has been hard hit by



deindustrialization. Typically again, it was long a Socialist Party fiefdom, with François Hollande among its notables, though the Town Hall went to the right in 2014. So, why Commercy?

Part of the answer lies in the evolution of the local group's activities. Its initial occupation of a roundabout, emblematic site of the Gilet Jaunes' agitation, lasted only a few days: the group decided to relocate to the town's main square, Place Charles de Gaulle, and constructed a wooden hut there—*la cabane*—which they nicknamed the Chalet of Solidarity. The square is the centre of local activity, home to the weekly market, with shops, cafes, the local concert hall; it is also an important thoroughfare for drivers. The decision to move there was significant in several respects: it represented the Gilets Jaunes' wish for public visibility; it was good for making contacts and for displays of solidarity, especially from the shopkeepers. The scale of the town helped; but the quest for maximum accessibility—including for those without cars—also related to one of the group's central objectives: ensuring people's physical presence, participating in a range of activities, but above all the daily Gilets Jaunes assembly. This spatial dimension was tightly linked to a deliberate mode of operation, oriented towards the practice of direct democracy.

Commercy's Chalet of Solidarity can thus be seen as a transposition, on a smaller scale, of the spatial logic of occupying that characterized the 2011 movements and, more recently, Nuit Debout in France. But in contrast to the 'citizenism'—*citoyennisme*—that marked Nuit Debout, for these Gilets Jaunes, the 'agora' aspect is not an end in itself but a means to advance a series of demands. The group's use of social media should also be understood in the context of this spatial determination. Facebook was decisive for contacts with the outside world, especially the 'assembly of assemblies'; but it played only a secondary role in the internal life of the Commercy Gilets Jaunes and in their daily organizing activity. It's not surprising that the loss of the hut—the Mayor declared he would demolish it—was felt as a serious threat to the group's existence, even though most of the members were confident it would survive displacement to another site.

What singles out this group is thus its structure and mode of functioning, which is guided by a set of distinctive ideas about self-organization, direct democracy and expanding participation. The ongoing practice of daily assemblies, combining a search for consensus with (frequent)

recourse to votes, has bodied forth these ideas in a literal sense. This process of apprenticeship has allowed a wide range of working-class people with no previous political experience to speak out and take part in planning collective actions. The testimonies gathered suggest a process of popular politicization, unfolding at the same pace as the evolution of the *Gilets Jaunes* at national level—in particular, the clash with the Macron government and the forces of repression. Setting out from a protest against fuel taxes, the *Gilets Jaunes*' objectives, here as elsewhere, have progressively expanded: from political-institutional questions—resignation of Macron, RIC, various other proposals for institutional change—to demands for fiscal and social justice.

In a tendency observed elsewhere, the Commercy group has notably emphasized the avoidance of any racist or stigmatizing attitudes or terms—targeting in particular the use of ‘cas soc’ or *cas sociaux*, a racialized version of ‘welfare scroungers’—that were sometimes heard in the early weeks of the movement. Views of that type have been ‘gently’ delegitimated—through discussion and also, more generally, through the shared experience of collective life and action. Moreover, the group seems equally conscious of the fact that the process of politicization is only just beginning and that discussions on potentially divisive questions, the EU in particular, lie ahead.

### *A successful encounter*

Having traced this evolution, the question, ‘Why Commercy?’ poses itself afresh. A more precise answer needs to look at the internal cultural factors that gave rise to the call for the ‘assembly of assemblies’. Here it’s apparent that what differentiates the Commercy group is the experience of a *rencontre réussie*—as in a love story—between those who had already acquired some ‘militant capital’ through their studies, or through some form of structured collective action, and the ‘novices’ mainly coming from the popular layers described above.<sup>6</sup> The first sub-group consisted of activist figures, some of them well-known locally, mainly from the radical libertarian left: a former NPA militant, a long-standing actor in local politics and a pillar of the *Gilets Jaunes*; a former municipal councillor; a retired Agence France Presse journalist and former Green

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<sup>6</sup> *Rencontre réussie*: the nuances of chance and happiness are missing from the literal English translation, ‘successful encounter’. [Trans]

candidate; an ex-member of the RPR and self-defined ‘social Gaullist’—alongside young environmental activists from the struggle against the nuclear landfill project at Bure, 40 km away; a special-needs teacher; a young civil servant who had got to know about direct-democracy practices while studying in Switzerland.

These more politicized figures, mostly men, played an informal but effective role in catalysing collective activity and providing a conceptual framework for it. Though they were careful not to monopolize the discussion, they spoke up more frequently than the other participants, especially at the most significant points. It was this sub-group that mainly took responsibility for the Commercy Gilets Jaunes’ social-media postings and, more generally, the tasks of writing and managing contact with the outside world. In effect they took on the functions of a publicity office, notably in their role in the organization of January’s ‘assembly of assemblies’. As in every constituted group, there was a division of labour.

Some of these figures belonged to the association, ‘Là qu’on vive’, founded in Commercy in 2017, which organizes regular discussions and activities and has a strong social-libertarian dimension.<sup>7</sup> Though they are very insistent that Là qu’on vive was not the origin of the Commercy

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<sup>7</sup> Là qu’on vive: ‘[Act] where you live’. According to its Facebook page, the organization’s objective is ‘to open a space in our town where everyone is free to come without feeling judged by their social class, their origins or their gender; a space where we can meet up, talk, get to know each other and, above all, re-learn how to co-operate by sharing knowledge and skills, without having any leaders.’ Its political goals are perhaps best expressed in a text written by militants from the communication and cultural workers section of the anarcho-sindicalist CNT union, posted on Là qu’on vive’s page: ‘To constitute local committees that organize themselves on principles of direct democracy: sovereign general assembly, permanently recallable representatives with imperative mandates, rotation of responsibilities. These autonomous communes will raise popular, egalitarian, social and ecological demands. If their claims aren’t met, they will go ahead and implement them, without concerning themselves with legal forms of representation—they will be ready to confront the Mayor and the Prefect, to send the Member of Parliament back to his jar [*bocal*].’ ‘As much as necessary, the free communes will federate to share their experiences, their reflections, to lend a hand in managing common goods . . . Thus the state will be progressively marginalized, its powers diminished to the point where it is rendered ineffective, until the day when one last push will suffice to topple the pyramid of authoritarian order.’ See Pierre Bance, ‘A propos de l’appel des gilets jaunes de Commercy’, *Autrefutur.net*, 3 December 2018.

Gilets Jaunes, its existence undoubtedly helped prepare the ground for the group's emphasis on self-organization and direct democracy. The Gilets Jaunes' 'assembly of assemblies' should be seen in the context of these classical principles of libertarian thinking—in particular, the idea of an extension 'from below' of the practices of self-organization and direct democracy through a federation of autonomous communes. At the same time, the experience of Commercy shouldn't be regarded as the simple application of a pre-existing project. Not all the group's 'intellectuals' would identify with the libertarian project of *Là qu'on vive*. Above all, its enthusiasts have learnt to 'drown' themselves in the group and to master the art of self-limitation, carefully avoiding any sense that their organization 'heads' the Gilets Jaunes' actions. Their language is by and large the same as that used by the other Gilets Jaunes, or can at least be easily understood—and, to a certain extent, adopted.

This adaptation to the 'common sense' of the group can take surprising forms: one libertarian militant with a rich history on the far left could be heard talking of the 'two extremes', a leitmotiv of the 'non-party' discourse of the Gilets Jaunes but also doxa of the reigning liberal 'centre'. Such an adaptation has nevertheless been essential in constructing the legitimacy of the local group's 'organic intellectuals', which equally provides the basis for them to spread their libertarian ideas with such success. No miracle, then, in the singularity of the Commercy Gilets Jaunes, but the result of consistent work and the 'successful encounter' of ordinary political actors and local activists with militant-cultural capital at their disposal. Most importantly, this process operated within the broader framework of a movement marked from the outset by the conjunction of socio-economic urgency—the 'end of the month'—and a high level of confrontation, often violent, with the state, that has marked the Gilets Jaunes overall. If the Commercy initiative met with a degree of success, it's because it represented a shared need to federate Gilets Jaunes experiences without cancelling their decentralized character. The 'assembly of assemblies' could thus help to articulate a practice of democracy 'from below' with a socio-economic content that could be immediately understood and taken up by larger social sectors.

### *From the local to the national?*

Examination of the internal dynamics of the Commercy group dispels any myth that the national meeting of the Gilet Jaunes was a

spontaneous event. Indeed it confirms what Sartre underscored about the experience of May 68—that the notion of pure ‘spontaneity’ was inappropriate. Rather, ‘one can only properly speak of groups, produced by the circumstances, which create themselves according to the situation. In creating themselves, they don’t gain access to some form of deep spontaneity. But they undergo the experience of a specific condition, on the basis of specific situations of exploitation and of particular demands; in the course of that experience, they conceive themselves, in a more or less accurate fashion.’<sup>8</sup> The Commercy group’s call for a *Gilets Jaunes* ‘assembly of assemblies’ represented, in Sartrean terms, an attempt to move from a ‘group in fusion’, emerging from the specificity of a situation, to a ‘constituted group’, united by processes of inclusion and exclusion, and able to take sovereign decisions.<sup>9</sup> This ‘ascent to generality’ is needed in order to liberate the potential universality of the demands advanced by the scattered groups, and to confront their common adversary. Nevertheless, it runs the risk inherent in all forms of institutionalization: confiscating the initiative coming from below, the autonomization of the new structures—falling back into the ‘practico-inert’, to use Sartre’s term.<sup>10</sup>

Given the libertarian inspiration that guided its initiatives, it’s not surprising that the question that dominated the ‘assembly of assemblies’ of 26–27 January was its ‘decisional’ character—its legitimacy in terms of taking decisions, settling debates—indeed, the very desirability of moving in that direction. At the Commercy group’s suggestion, the assembly accepted the principle of delegation—two representatives from each participating group—limited by imperative mandates and combined with majority voting—distinguishing it from the interminable proceduralism that had bogged down *Nuit Debout*. Nevertheless, between those who had come as mandated delegates for their group and others who were there as observers, between those who simply wanted to enlarge their circle of contacts and those who wanted a more formal structure, it wasn’t easy to reach a unified and forward-moving basis.

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<sup>8</sup> See ‘Masses, spontanéité, parti. Discussion entre Sartre et la direction d’*Il Manifesto*’, 27 August 1969, in *Il Manifesto: Analyses et thèses de la nouvelle extrême-gauche italienne*, Paris 1971, p. 300.

<sup>9</sup> A transcription of the debates of the ‘assembly of assemblies’ is available on the website *Vive la Révolution*.

<sup>10</sup> See also Sophie Wahnich’s usage of Sartre’s concepts in this regard: ‘De la fusion, de l’incertitude et du pari’, *Libération*, 2 January 2019.

The debate crystallized around the question of agreeing a platform of demands—another point of difference with the ‘we demand nothing’ perspective that dominated *Nuit Debout*, or at least its *citoyenniste* version.<sup>11</sup> Elaborating such a text presupposes making a selection from a multiplicity of proposals, setting priorities, choosing between formulations—in other words, it’s thoroughly political. The solution proposed for the ‘assembly of assemblies’ was a compromise: it would draft an ‘appeal’, setting out principles and enumerating demands, but avoiding a finalized list or a strict hierarchization. When the 350-plus Yellow Vest delegates gathered at Sorcy-Saint-Martin, however, the issue of decision-making legitimacy was put in further doubt by the question of the gathering’s representativity, with only around seventy out of several hundred groups in attendance, of which at least ten came from the Paris region. It was agreed that the draft appeal would be discussed in the local groups, with the next ‘assembly of assemblies’ deputed to meet at Saint-Nazaire in April 2019—though it was recognized that the process risked being overtaken by the press of events and by parallel attempts to forge regional-level structures.<sup>12</sup> Nor did the ‘assembly of assemblies’ have any leverage over the individuals promoted as national figureheads for the *Gilets Jaunes* by the French media, usually on the basis of their Facebook followings, but who demonstrated scant regard for democratic principles and procedures.

The Appeal itself trod a middle path between the language of the *Gilets Jaunes* novices and that of the more experienced political cadre. It avoided terms like ‘capitalism’ and emphasized points that were likely to win widespread support. Its central objectives were ‘redistribution of wealth’ and ‘ending social inequalities’, though it also evoked real democracy, working conditions, the environment and an end to discrimination. There followed a lengthy list of ‘demands and strategic proposals’ as formulated and debated by the local groups, including higher wages and pensions, the eradication of poverty in all its forms,

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<sup>11</sup> See the remarks of Alexis Cukier and Davide Gallo Lassere, ‘Contre la loi travail et son monde’, *Les Temps modernes*, no. 691, 2016, esp. pp. 130–4.

<sup>12</sup> Videos of the Saint-Nazaire ‘assembly of assemblies’, 5–7 April 2019, can be found online. Its Appeal denounced the ‘anti-democratic and ultra-liberal’ character of the EU institutions but, respecting ‘the autonomy of *Gilets Jaunes* groups and of individuals in general’, made no call for a particular vote or abstention in the May 2019 Euro elections.

the transformation of political institutions—RIC, constitutional assembly, curbing the privileges of deputies—and ecological transition. The delegates called for equality for all, whatever their nationality; attacked the marginalization of poor neighbourhoods, rural areas and overseas territories; and declared themselves ‘neither racist nor sexist nor homophobic’. State repression and Macron’s ‘great national debate’ were denounced in vivid terms. The appeal concluded with a call for Macron’s resignation, underlined by the Commercy group’s emblematic slogan, ‘Long live power to the people, for the people and by the people.’

By comparison with other texts issued by the *Gilets Jaunes*, this was more distinctly marked by the concerns of the left. The question of taxes barely appeared, the popular referendum was less prominent than one might have expected and socio-economic demands more salient. In fact, most surveys confirm that questions of inequality, poverty and the cost of living are at the core of the *Gilets Jaunes*’ preoccupations, outstripping that of taxes. Researchers at Sciences Po Grenoble, who have examined the biggest sample, suggest that though the rejection of political elites and the demand for real popular sovereignty win unanimous approval, detailed demands for institutional transformation tend to come from the most educated, economically secure and left-identified sectors of the movement—a minority of the (weighted) sample, in which 74 per cent describe their economic situation as ‘precarious’ and 60 per cent refuse to locate themselves on a left–right axis.<sup>13</sup>

### *Triangular consciousness*

It’s worth dwelling on the identitarian demarcations—‘whatever their nationality’; ‘neither racist nor sexist nor homophobic’—in the appeal of the ‘assembly of assemblies’, which stand out from most *Gilets Jaunes* writings in their rebuttal of the ostensible *francité* of the movement. If the *Yellow Vests*’ demands focus on socio-economic and political-institutional questions, not the racist-Islamophobic agenda, there is no

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<sup>13</sup> Tristan Guerra, Frédéric Gonthier, Chloé Alexandre, Florent Gougou et Simon Persico, ‘Qui sont vraiment les GJ? Les résultats d’une étude sociologique’, *Le Monde*, 26 January 2019. The survey found that inequalities (26%), purchasing power (25%) and poverty (14%) topped the list of issues, followed by taxes (11%).

doubt that anti-immigrant opinions have some place within the movement, as in the population at large.<sup>14</sup> Their intensity rises in inverse proportion to the importance accorded to the question of social injustice. The dynamic of the mobilization has undoubtedly been positive in this regard, though without dispelling the ambivalence discussed above. Some have argued that the movement has brought back to prominence the principal divide between the ‘them’ of the elites and the ‘us’ of the people: ‘Stigmatization of immigrants and those on benefits is rarely heard at the Gilets Jaunes roadblocks, as if class consciousness was unifying. The question now is whether the internal tensions that have appeared in the past years between the more secure strata and those on state aid will come to the fore, or whether a unified popular bloc will constitute itself against the elites.’<sup>15</sup>

That possibility, faint as it may seem, has already alarmed the elites in question, who have gone on the counter-attack. Macron had already introduced the themes of ‘identity’ and ‘immigration’, keywords in the racialization of the political agenda in France, in his speech of 10 December 2018. The links between racial stigmatization and the targeting of those on state benefits hardly need to be underlined; the latter may not belong to racialized groups, but as many have pointed out, their discursive targeting has an othering effect. It’s been argued that workers’ consciousness of the social world in these conditions is ‘triangular’: ‘They feel they are not only under pressure from above, but from below—the idea that there are too many unemployed who aren’t looking for work, who live off benefits paid for by other people’s taxes.’<sup>16</sup> This ‘triangular consciousness’, inherent in the condition of social subordination, has become more pronounced with the fragmentation of the working class, the retreat of public services and downgrading of universal social rights in favour of policies aimed at specific layers, increasing internal

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<sup>14</sup> According to the Sciences Po Grenoble researchers, nearly 6 out of 10 thought ‘there is too much immigration in France’, roughly the same as the national level. Those most opposed to immigration were also least interested in politics and most concerned with ‘purchasing power’: Guerra et al., ‘Qui sont vraiment les GJ?’.

<sup>15</sup> Nicolas Duvoux, ‘Gilets Jaunes: La perspective d’une réunification d’un bloc populaire inquiète les politiques’, *Le Monde*, 7 February 2019.

<sup>16</sup> Olivier Schwartz, ‘Vivons-nous encore dans une société de classes? Trois remarques sur la société française contemporaine’, *La Vie des Idées*, 22 September 2009.



competition among the popular classes. Its pervasiveness within popular ‘common sense’ is one of the sources of the growing ‘anger against taxes’—those who live by their labour feeling that they benefit less and less from its results.

That anger easily acquires a racializing colouration. If the centrality of social demands and unifying effects of collective action can help to counteract that process, it remains the case that the racial fractures within the popular classes can’t be named in these conditions—except through racist stigmatization. The necessity of keeping that at a distance, indispensable for the cohesion of a movement that aims both to rally all and to suppress all dissension, leads to keeping this question carefully out of sight. This position is inherent in the call for *francité* that marks the identity of the Gilets Jaunes: it acts both as a vector of inclusion, in the republican mode—all united behind the national flag, ‘without distinction of race or religion’—but also, and for the same reason, of exclusion. It occludes the invisibilization of non-nationals and the fact that, against the yardstick of ‘Frenchness’, some nationals (whites, non-Muslims) turn out to be more ‘French’ than others. Yet if the present political system debar the representation of ‘the little people’, those ‘from below’, as the Gilets Jaunes argue, it excludes in a much more radical fashion those who contest *francité*, who are placed in a category of permanent sub-citizenship—and who belong to an overwhelming extent to the same social world of ‘below’. The questioning of their ‘Frenchness’ by the symbolic markers of the Gilets Jaunes is undoubtedly one of the reasons why the movement initially had relatively little resonance in the *banlieue*—even if this is now beginning to grow.<sup>17</sup>

To return to the Commerce Appeal: in delimiting the identity of the Yellow Vests from racism—and also from sexism and homophobia—and including the ‘grey zones’ of *francité* (poor neighbourhoods, overseas territories), the text touches a sensitive point; more precisely, a repressed experience of the Gilets Jaunes movement, which touches its very identity. In doing so the Appeal takes a risk, certainly, but it also stakes a bet whose success is essential for the constitution of an ‘us’ that genuinely

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<sup>17</sup> Emmanuel Riond , ‘Pourquoi Toulouse est l’un des bastions des GJ’, *Mediapart*, 9 February 2019; Lucie Delaporte and Mathilde Goanec, ‘Gilets Jaunes d’Ile-de-France: “Les quartiers populaires sont l ”’, *Mediapart*, 16 February 2019.

unites the working and popular classes—moving to the same rhythm, as Gramsci would have said.

### *Exclusion and representation*

Starting from a protest against fuel taxes, expanding to tackle questions of fiscal justice and ‘cost of living’, the Yellow Vest movement found its emblematic demand in the citizens’ initiative referendum, RIC. What social worldview subtends these claims? In the summary of *Le Monde diplomatique*: ‘The bosses should earn less, their employees should live decently: a “moral economy” of a certain sort.’<sup>18</sup> In the work of Edward Thompson, the ‘moral economy’ designated a set of shared norms, generally arising from common law, intended to regulate the economy of a still pre-industrial and pre-capitalist world around notions of a fair price or the guarantee of bread for all. When those norms were violated, the people had the right to revolt and to demand that the sovereign restore the implicit pact of which they were the basis.<sup>19</sup> By analogy, it’s been suggested that the Gilets Jaunes’ social demands articulate the principles of a contemporary ‘moral economy’—one that has come under incessant attack from the ruling power. The movement, in this light, aims at a restoration, rather than a revolution—at re-establishing a national compact, rather than the overthrow of the existing order.

Stimulating and broadly pertinent, the analogy nevertheless founders on the radical difference between the epochs in question: the power addressed by the popular masses of the *ancien régime* owed its legitimacy to Divine Right. The King was supposed to care for the well-being of his subjects because they were ‘his’—not because he was accountable to the sovereign body of the citizens. It is precisely the regression towards a monarchical presidency and the sequestration of decision-making by a political elite indifferent to their conditions of life that the Yellow Vests categorically reject. The social compact they demand has at its core the democratic dimension that the present regime tramples underfoot. The figure of Macron is the highest incarnation of this denial of democracy, through his fusion of the monarchical apparatus of the Fifth Republic’s presidentialism with the arrogance of the contemporary bourgeois class.

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<sup>18</sup> Pierre Souchon, ‘Avant, j’avais l’impression d’être seule’, *Le Monde diplomatique*, no. 778, January 2019.

<sup>19</sup> See Samuel Hayat, ‘Les Gilets Jaunes, l’économie morale et le pouvoir’, [samuelhayat.wordpress.com](http://samuelhayat.wordpress.com), 5 December 2018.

Rather than the 'moral economy' of pre-industrial societies, we would propose another historical analogy which reformulates that 'moral' dimension within the framework of a largely industrialized society and a political regime founded on the principle of representation. The Chartist movement in England announced itself with the publication of the 'Charter of the People' in May 1838. It had six points: universal male suffrage, secret ballots, eligibility of all citizens to stand as candidates, remuneration for elected representatives, equal constituencies and—unconscionably radical today—annual parliaments. The focus of the Chartists' struggle was the institutionalized political exclusion of the popular classes: barely 15 per cent of the male population was enfranchised, despite the expansion grudgingly granted by the 1832 Reform Act. But winning the suffrage was equally seen as a lever for wide-scale social reforms targeting the 1834 Poor Law, with its notorious regime of workhouses for the indigent; the regressive tax system, the corruption of the political elite and, more generally, the privileges of the rich and idle, the landowning class that still largely dominated the summit of the state.

In the Chartist worldview, an extension of the English tradition of democratic radicalism of the late-18th and early-19th centuries, the cause of workers' socio-economic woes lay in the political monopoly of the rich. As Gareth Stedman Jones has argued: 'In radical discourse, the dividing line between the classes was not that between employer and employed, but that between the represented and the unrepresented.'<sup>20</sup> The strategy was not the construction of a workers' movement, even if Chartism largely drew its support from the working class, but an alliance of 'the people' and 'the producers' against the idle rentiers and landed proprietors who monopolized power. Its language conveyed a moral vision of the economy, centred on notions of justice, dignity and fairness, leaving aside the ownership of the means of production.

There are some clear commonalities with the *Gilets Jaunes*. In both cases, the motive force of the movement is neither purely political nor purely economic, but a dynamic combination of the two. Both react against the political exclusion of the popular classes and conceive public action—reinvigorated by a series of institutional reforms aiming to

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<sup>20</sup> Gareth Stedman Jones, 'Rethinking Chartism', in *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working-Class History 1832–1982*, Cambridge 1983, pp. 106–7.

expand citizens' participation—as the most effective means to obtain social reforms favouring those layers. Facing a parliamentary regime founded on censitary, propertied suffrage and upheavals of early industrial capitalism, the Chartists demanded the reform of representative institutions to make them more responsive to the citizens. The Gilets Jaunes confront the mechanisms of the 'hidden census',<sup>21</sup> which serves to marginalize the weight of the subordinated classes within representative institutions, combined with the decrepitude of parliamentary democracy after decades of neoliberal policies. Abandoned by the political parties that once fought for their participation in public life, the popular classes took refuge in abstention—or supported the far right.

### *Exploitable demands*

Their secession is at the heart of the organic crisis manifested in falling turnouts and desertion of the mainstream parties. The collapse of the Keynesian–Fordist social compromise also involved the deliquescence of political-institutional forms which, despite their bureaucratization and inherent limitations, permitted a form of popular participation. The Gilets Jaunes movement has served both to reveal and to express the severity of the crisis of representation. Like the Charter, although in a very different historical context, their programme suggests that state action can remedy their situation, without touching the mechanisms of capital accumulation, or even those of secondary redistribution. With the exception of the wealth tax, a largely symbolic measure, the programme's emphasis falls on the state's boosting 'purchasing power' by cutting direct taxes. It fails to concretize the Gilets Jaunes' demand for redistribution in favour of the popular classes, their anger at social inequality and the arrogance of 'the rich'.

Though the local groups also target the multinationals and the phenomena of globalization—from environmental damage to the power of global corporations, offshoring of jobs and supranational institutions—so far, the political economy of the movement barely scratches the surface of neoliberal policies. Indeed, it risks legitimating indiscriminate tax cuts and the destruction of public services, as measures that would boost 'purchasing power'. It's not surprising that Macron has tried to snooker the Gilets Jaunes by taking them at their word. In his 'Letter to the French

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<sup>21</sup> See Daniel Gaxie, 'Le cens cachée', *Réseaux*, vol. 5, no. 22, 1987, pp. 29–51.

people' of 13 January 2019, he declared that it would be impossible to lower taxes without also cutting overall public spending, and invited the public to debate where the axe should fall.<sup>22</sup>

The RIC, the idea of the citizens' referendum that has become the beacon of the movement, is supposed to return power to the people by bypassing the party and institutional system. Yet it rests on an understanding of politics—as a list of discrete questions, posed as if in a quiz—that risks simply replicating the depoliticization of neoliberal 'governance': eliminating any notion of politics as a confrontation between currents of ideas, of projects endowed with overall coherence. Instead of resolving the crisis of representation, these proposals merely reflect and deepen it. Cultivating the anti-political illusion of a *tabula rasa*, free of mediations, instead of addressing the task of their reinvention, they would rather encourage the authoritarian flight forward inherent in the neoliberal state, to which the institutions of the Fifth Republic seem to have been predestined from the start. There too Macron, wiler than he's often given credit for, aims to recoup the demand for direct democracy by repeating the Bonapartist performance that characterized his 2017 campaign—that of the President rolling up his sleeves, going among the people as part of a 'great national debate', naturally directed from above, allowing the 'unmediated' self-expression of the citizens.

How to explain this striking gap between a movement borne up by popular anger against social injustices and democratic disintegration, and its expression in demands—more coherent than many like to admit—that can so easily be reversed into their opposite? The analogy with the Chartists may again be useful here. In addition to the implacable state repression unleashed against it, the movement rapidly came up against the internal contradictions of its political economy. The idea of political reform as the lever for universal social reform lost its credibility under the reforming governments of liberal Tories like Robert Peel, capable of making concessions on matters like taxation without giving an inch on the extension of the suffrage—or foregoing the option of merciless repression. The political economy of Chartism proved incapable of confronting the disjunction between the economic and political

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<sup>22</sup> Wrapping up his 'great debate' on 7 May 2019, Macron confirmed that lower income tax would be compensated by further spending cuts, longer working hours and closure of some business tax loopholes.

spheres, institutionalized by the maturing liberal state. Socialism and trade-union action would eventually pick up the baton of a political movement whose final burst of glory came in 1848. Without a change in orientation, which seems unlikely at the moment, the Gilets Jaunes movement may struggle to avoid a similar condition of powerlessness—to create a dynamic capable of blocking the ferocious repression aimed against it; to advance demands that would not be so easily recuperable by a vigilant state.

### *At Troyes*

That said, the social and political experience that the upsurge represents is not exhausted by its official programme. Discussions with Gilets Jaunes at Troyes in late March, following a showing of François Ruffin's film, *J'veux du soleil*, made clear that the movement's capacity to withstand the test of time, and maintain its mobilizations over five months, depended on a genuinely collective mode of organizing. The active Gilets Jaunes had a clear preference for direct personal interaction; Facebook was seen as a site of manipulation 'from below'—fertile terrain for rumours and personal rivalries—as well as state surveillance 'from above', even if it was still the only tool available for coordination and communication of a larger scale. The Troyes group also offered an interesting insight into the *modus operandi* of the far right.

Serge, a former trade unionist at a Citroën car dealership, on early retirement after sickness, and a member of Mélenchon's party, La France insoumise, explained how he had originally put his organizing skills—fliers, publicity, demonstrations—at the disposal of one of the precursor groups in the region, France en Colère, which encompassed 'all sorts—a real red-white-and-blue', certainly including the far right, and organized first against fuel taxes, then hospital closures. In Troyes, 4,000 people came out in response to the Gilets Jaunes' call for action against the fuel tax on 17 November 2018—a huge crowd for an old market town of 60,000. At the beginning, four roundabouts were occupied round the clock. At one of them, Serge reported, two local far-right militants from Debout la France tried to take over the movement—'pulling strings from behind their computer'—by announcing themselves on Facebook as regional representatives for the Aube Gilets Jaunes: 'That caused a chill!' According to Serge, the two of them hardly spent any time on the roundabouts: 'They'd be sitting in a café while the rest were getting

tear-gassed on a demonstration—people soon saw what was going on.’ Most of the *Gilets Jaunes* had no political background, he went on. ‘But they’re so fed up with this rubbish life that they’re ready to go anywhere, to follow anybody’:

You hear some of them say, ‘There’s no money for us, and the immigrants get free lodging, they get free care when there’s no one to care for our old people, no one to care for my mother.’ The other day Giacomoni [one of the far-right duo] showed up with a pile of leaflets saying welfare assistance should be cut, because it was costing us too much. I refused to distribute the fliers, and so did the others at the Brico roundabout. We’ve always hammered it home: ‘Don’t mistake the target!’—and also, we try informing people . . . That’s beginning to bear fruit, but it’s been hard, and it’s not over yet.<sup>23</sup>

Asked why, of the four roundabouts originally taken in November, only the Brico occupation was still going strong, Serge replied that the atmosphere varied at each. The one held by the types from *Debout la France* was run in military style, with leaders and rigid rules. Another run by local *Colère* activists was more sympathetic, but one *Yellow Vest* there had tried to set herself up as a leader, which led to arguments. At the Brico, they’d had a good collective atmosphere from the start, and plenty of local people had brought them food and drink as gestures of solidarity. Fifty or sixty of them met to debate what points to raise at the Saint-Nazaire ‘assembly of assemblies’ and to choose two delegates to represent them. What were the effects of the current round of juridical repression? ‘People are getting it right in the face, with the fines and the law cases against them—they’ve been shocked by the repression. Whether that changes their politics, I don’t know. But it makes them angrier, that’s for sure.’

In face of this determination, the response of a *Gilet Jaune* to a journalist’s question comes to mind. Asked what she thought of Macron’s concessions on the fuel tax, she replied: ‘Whatever they concede, it will

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<sup>23</sup> For all the differences with the Weimar period, when mass parties of left and right fought to capture the popular anger and aspirations for radical change, it may be worth recalling the words of a young German noted by Daniel Guérin in the summer of 1932: ‘You see, we’re pitted against each other. Passions are at boiling point, we are killing each other, but fundamentally we want the same thing . . .’ [Guérin: ‘Really?’] ‘Yes, the same thing, a new world, radically different from today’s . . . a new system’: Daniel Guérin, *La peste brune*, Paris 1971, p. 31.

never be enough.' This suggests that the movement bears on something that escapes all quantification, an aspiration that can't yet be put into words. It would be hard to find a more succinct expression of the gap between the perception of an intolerable situation and the radical impossibility of imagining a different one. This is where the challenge for today's struggles lies: inventing an alternative, not as a utopia but as a project that would also include the means of its realization, in a new combination of radicalism and strategic thinking.

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