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YELLOW VESTS [GILETS JAUNES]: A CONTEMPORARY SNAPSHOT OF THE MEANING OF SIGNS

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ABSTRACT:

This essay presents the Yellow Vests [*Gilets jaunes*] movement that emerged in France in summer 2018, as a citizen initiative instrumental in the social contestations, the strikes, and the street demonstrations, which are currently growing in the country in opposition to the new economic plan. To protest the destruction of worker's rights and the imposition of higher taxes on the people, but lower on the investors—what the demonstrators call “Macronie” (a capitalist oligarchic authoritative system, named after the president)—, they have flashed yellow safety vests as a sign of emergency and of dissent.

Composed of a diversity of gender, ages, origins, social conditions, or professional affiliations, the Yellow Vests have been able to articulate lingering inequalities of the existing class structure and reveal the alarming level of social distress experienced daily by the greater part of the population. They have organized in fraternity to defend the country's public interests against corporate private profits and, despite being faced with constrictive and divisive forces, they still stand united to shape a different model for the future. Using semiology allows emphasizing the emancipative and cooperative power of the movement, and of the yellow vest itself when understood as a sign, and reveals a potential that has been confronted to a rare level of unspoken police repression and violence, which is the expression of state control and censorship.

*All the shouts and SOS take off into the air,
in water they leave a trace, the residues of which make the beauty.
Caught in their glass ships, the messages struggle,
but the waves bring them back, as stones of stars onto the cliffs... ”¹*
Daniel Balavoine, *Tous les cris les SOS* [All the Shouts and SOS], chorus lyrics, 1985.

For the past year or so in France, yellow safety vests have been associated with the term “*Gilets jaunes*” (“Yellow Vests”) and usually combined in sentences with nouns like “movement” and “crisis” to qualify groups of demonstrators who had opted for high-visibility yellow safety vests to identify, recognize, and acknowledge themselves and one another. The movement started unexpectedly in the midst of summer 2018, when online petitions and calls for symbolic acts urged the French people to expose their disagreement to a new gas tax and reveal their economic distress by placing their yellow vests on the dashboard of their cars. When the yellow vests blossomed, not only did the announcement of the gas tax gain immediate scrutiny, but it also revealed the extent to which fiscal hardship had started affecting the large majority of the population: until then, an invisible majority.

¹ Daniel Balavoine (1952–1986) was a French singer, songwriter, and political activist.

The author's translation of the lyrics from French:

*Tous les cris les SOS partent dans les airs,
Dans l'eau laissent une trace, dont les écumes font la beauté.
Pris dans leurs vaisseaux de verre, les messages luttent,
Mais les vagues les ramènent, en pierres d'étoiles sur les rochers...*

To put this in context, since September 2016, the yellow safety vest had become a true commodity; everyone in France who owns a car, a motorcycle, or even a bike is required, by law, to possess one and to use it in order to make themselves clearly visible in case of an emergency. And there was an emergency: the new tax that started the unrest was just another tax—this tax, already in excess of 65%, pushes the price per liter of gas to about 1.50 Euros. Proportionally, if the same tariff were applied to the United States, the price of gas would at least double if not triple and reach \$6.40 per gallon!² According to the protestors, the gas tax was “*la goutte qui a fait déborder le vase*” (“the straw that broke the camel’s back”), it was following and would be followed by many other already announced taxes (on water, electricity, gas, stamps, tolls, and so on and so forth), many of which have been implemented since the beginning of the Yellow Vest Movement; maintaining France’s rank as second in the world for the level of taxation applied to its citizens (45.3% of the GDP, against around 20% in the United States), while ISF (*Impôt de Solidarité sur la Fortune*) the Solidarity Wealth Tax on the so called “elite” and ultra-rich (the 1%) have decreased and tax evasion is still not intended to be controlled. The movement also emerged in a context of repeated attacks by the government on worker’s rights (denying French unions historical accomplishments and now allowing employers to extend the amount of minimum wage payment hours from 35 to 50 per week), this along with frozen salaries in most public positions for at least the past five years, and a planned deindexation of unemployment as well as of retirement benefits.

Needless to say, this situation angered most citizens while harshening other extremely challenging living conditions involving requirements for higher education, intense job competition, generalization of low incomes employment, high unemployment rates (8.5% of the population, above double that of the United States), increased cost-of-living, especially in larger cities, as well as the depletion and defection of all public services (transportation, education, health, energy, etc.) especially outside of larger metropolises, all massively underfunded and understaffed.³ This is in part why the yellow safety vests have become an unequivocal symbol of social distress happening in the country as well as of rebellion against a privileged and authoritative government.

Tapping into semiology (the study of signs) allows us to understand how signs are created, as well as how they could be exploited. Founder of semiology, Ferdinand de Saussure, explains that within linguistics there is no intrinsic relationship nor internal logic between an object and the name that qualifies it.⁴ The same applies to signs and symbols and the ideas that they refer to; they are also constructs, fortunate or unfortunate associations of concepts. Consequently, as the content of a symbol is relative, so must be the power of its message: relative and not absolute. Ultimately, anything only has the power one wishes to give it.

² Global Petrol Prices: https://fr.globalpetrolprices.com/France/gasoline_prices/ and https://www.globalpetrolprices.com/USA/gasoline_prices/ (to compare to U.S. gasoline prices for the same period), accessed December 20, 2019. For information, and even if the government withdrew the gas tax in response to the massive Yellow Vests demonstrations that developed in winter 2018, since then the price of gas has increased even more and not decreased, reaching the estimate mentioned above.

³ Figures in comparison to the United States data presented here are intended to respond to recent articles published by the U.S. press which call into question the appropriateness of the current French social movements, especially the retirement reform, on the basis of stereotypical views regarding French privileges, and idealizing a different reality that few statistics can help to start unveiling. A review of such press coverage was recently published in *French Morning* an online journal intended for the French community living in the United States. Emeline Combi, “The American Press Wonders Why These French Who Have Everything Are So Upset,” *French Morning*, December 18, 2019. Available in French at this link: *French Morning*, <https://frenchmorning.com/la-presse-americaine-sinterroge-pourquoi-ces-francais-qui-ont-tout-ont-ils-tellement-en-colere/> Accessed December 18, 2019. This review which also intended to minimize the relevance of the current social movement (as most French mass media have since the start of the movement), relies on opinions formulated in articles published recently by Kim Willsher, in *The Los Angeles Times*, <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2019-12-12/les-miserables-why-are-the-french-who-seem-to-have-much-so-quick-to-protest->; by James McAuley, in *The Washington Post*, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/france-braces-for-massive-strikes-and-transportation-disruptions-starting-dec-5/2019/12/03/fb65a67a-0faf-11ea-924c-b34d09bbc948_story.html; and by Adam Nossiter and Mélissa Godin, in *The New York Times* <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/17/world/europe/france-strikes-protest.html> Accessed December 18, 2019. It should be explained that the luxury products advertised as French and discussed in some of these articles are not financially accessible to the largest majority of the French population. In scale, it would be like projecting that every American’s lifestyle matches that of its most prominent celebrities.

⁴ Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916), translated as *Course in General Linguistics* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

While it is now well understood that questioning systems of signs allows, for example, the deconstruction and negation of inappropriate determinations, such as in stereotypes; semiotics also unlocks the emancipating power that new symbols might be created to better fit the most of us, and to correct unfortunate associations that have been imposed onto the majority of us. Therefore, an additional dimension to the current discussion on signs and symbols is that of their appropriation and recognition by the majority of people, like the yellow vest. Can it occur outside of the identified institutional systems they attack? And more importantly, can they generate their own power; be emancipative and cooperative rather than constrictive and divisive?

Without leaders and labels, the Yellow Vests Movement developed outside of any political affiliations or unionized organizations; it grew organically out of necessity. As a citizen movement, the Yellow Vests has successfully initiated the convergence of the struggles and connected and unified categories of people as protestors that usually do not interact or communicate with one another. What they had in common were their daily struggles: not being able to make a living and make ends meet, living on consumer credits or with bank accounts overdrawn by the 15th, the 10th, or the 5th of the month, if not even earlier. Socio-professionally, the majority are blue collars, lower to middle working-class from factories, transportation, public services (as teachers, health professionals, or firemen, to mention a few of the most active corporations), some are independent professionals, while others are unemployed or living from part-time job to part-time job. They come from a variety of immigration backgrounds and can be from different age groups—even if the majority are probably in their 30s–50s. On the youngest side of the spectrum, Ritchy Thibault, outspoken on social media, is only 15.⁵ Also unexpectedly, retirees and elders were present in large numbers from the beginning of the movement (compared to their absence from previous social conflicts in the past fifty years). Unprecedented also was the significant presence of wheelchair users present in public protests.

Early on many exposed their yellow vest on their car dashboard and, as the movement organized in September last year, people then started wearing them on their back as they joined groups of protestors occupying roundabouts in small villages as well as in larger cities throughout France. Then for a few months, along with sympathizers (often first-time demonstrators, commonly socially isolated, and sometimes marginalized), they began occupying sites, built shelters, and organized acts of public disobedience, such as opening highways to free tolls for the people, or restricting access to identified tax exempted brand stores, restaurants, and commercial malls.⁶ During the days and nights of occupations over the first months of the protest, across generations and social conditions, and beyond the shame, the embarrassment, and the frustrations that they had felt in their inability to take care of their families and of themselves, the demonstrators shared personal experiences and often understood that their concerns were in fact commonly shared by many of their co-citizens. From these discussions, they expressed feelings of support and empowerment; many also evoked the fraternity that they found in the movement they had thought was gone from the country forever.⁷ Women were also present in impressive numbers since the first days of mobilization, they occupy leadership roles (but not necessarily as spokesperson) in organizing, communicating, and networking with other groups.⁸

⁵ Ritchy Thibault is from the French travelers' community, his official Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/pages/category/Personal-Blog/Ritchy-Thibault-237576196875467/>. Accessed Dec. 26, 2019.

⁶ Despite the eviction of the protestors occupying the roundabouts and the destruction of their shelters by police at the end of 2018, these acts of civil disobedience continue today; this is attested by photographs and videos, and abundantly documented on social media. Exemplary of this is the systematic sabotage and destruction of road speed radars documented here: <https://www.facebook.com/tonylea84/>. Accessed December 28, 2019.

⁷ A good report on the roundabout's phenomenon has been compiled in the documentary movie *J'veux du soleil* [I Want Some Sun, released on April 2019], by Gilles Perret and deputy François Ruffin (independent publisher of satirical newspaper *Fakir*, also deputy in the opposition's democrat socialist party: La France insoumise). The trailer is available here: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt9576110/>. Accessed Dec. 12, 2019.

⁸ Priscilla Ludosky, an online cosmetic saleswoman born in 1985 with descent from Martinique (an insular French region in the West Indies) launched on 29 May 2018, a petition called "*pour une baisse des prix du carburant à la pompe*" [For a decrease of gas price at the pump] on *Change.org*. It quickly collected more than 1.19 million signatures. This petition is often presented as the starter for the Yellow Vests Movement. Ludosky was also one of the co-organizers of the first protest, ACT 1, in Paris, on November 17th, 2019. She has regularly spoken publicly about the Yellow Vests movement.

At the end of 2018, when the roundabout occupation sites were strategically dismantled by police, and the movement turned its action to organizing weekly public marches on Saturdays in Paris and in other large cities, their sizable numbers in street demonstrations were noticed.⁹ This is also when the back of the yellow vest itself became the recipient of hand-written messages, slogans, and caricatures, which spilled into the streets to call-out the government's inaction, asking for fiscal and ecological justice, as well as more power to the people—asking for the RIC (*Réferendum d'Initiative Citoyenne*: Referendum Initiated by Citizens).¹⁰ A selection of such messages says: “Who sows misery harvests anger,” “Halt taxes,” “Fed up. NO taxes on the people,” “M.D.I. Undetermined Length Demonstration. We want some purchasing power,” “For economic and ecologic justice,” “End of the World, End of the Month, Same Combat,” “Macron. No to fiscal repression,” “Work, consume, and shut up,” “The milk cow, it's not Homey,” “My democracy hurts,” “My France hurts,” “Shame on the government,” “The RIC [Referendum Initiated by Citizens] is the answer to all our issues,” or inspired by surrealist painter René Magritte: “This is not a yellow vest” or even “This is not just a yellow vest! It's much more!!!” etc., etc., etc.¹¹

Beyond the personalized messages on the backs of yellow vests are numerous independent media created for and by the movement and available on the Internet¹² They respond to the manipulation of information by official media and to a call formulated as such: “The media no longer exists, you the ‘spectators’ of what is not shown on television, you are tomorrow’s media.”¹³ Additionally, on various social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, You Tube, and the like), Yellow Vests collectives are making available innumerable photographs of their actions, interminable unedited and live video content of their demonstrations, and countless testimonies of their participants, giving the movement credibility and visibility and, despite national and international media contempt and indifference, attesting to its continued determination and existence.¹⁴

⁹ Starting on November 17th, 2018, and as a direct consequence of the eviction of protestors from roundabouts, street marches called “ACTS” started in Paris and other cities (Marseille, Lyon, Bordeaux, Toulouse, Nantes, Rennes, Rouen, Dijon, Strasbourg, to mention only a few). Still to date, these protests are scheduled weekly on Saturdays or during the weekend to allow those who wish to participate to not miss work. After more than a year of activity, in the coming weeks the movement is planning beyond its 60th ACTS! This number at once summarizes the determination of the protestors despite the indifference of the government.

¹⁰ Plein le dos, <https://pleinledos.org>, last accessed August 20, 2019. This website documents and archives photographs, personal messages, and slogans written by French demonstrators on the back of their yellow vests. The content is organized according to the ACTS’ number in which they were found. To date, this website is the most comprehensive database of people concerns documenting the Yellow Vests Movement.

¹¹ The author’s translation: “Qui sème la misère récolte la colère,” “Halte aux taxes,” “Ras le bol. Taxes sur le peuple NON,” “M.D.I. Manif. à durée indéterminée.” “Nous voulons du pouvoir d’achat,” “Pour une justice économique et écologique,” “Fin du monde, fin du mois, même combat,” “Macron. Non à la répression fiscale,” “Travaille, consomme, et ferme ta gueule,” “La vache à lait c’est pas bibi,” “J’ai mal à ma démocratie,” “J’ai mal à ma France,” “Honte au gouvernement,” “Le RIC est la réponse à tous nos problèmes,” “Ceci n’est pas un gilet jaune,” “Ceci n’est pas qu’un gilet jaune! C’est bien plus!!!” etc., etc., etc.

¹² Major independent media that have been created by and for the movement are available on the Internet: Vécu le media desgilets jaunes: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC4l-xYSe02QemAr_cNhVIHw; Civicio: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCKYdJwfkJMRIZFi5M-6sZvQ/videos>; TVGJ (Gilet jaune television): <https://tvgj.fr>; GJ Magazine: <https://www.facebook.com/UnionGiletsJaunes/>, to mention only a few.

¹³ The author’s translation: “*Les médias n’existent plus, vous ‘spectateurs’ de ce qui ne passe pas à la télé, vous êtes le media de demain.*” This message was found on one of the numerous social media pages affiliated with the movement.

¹⁴ The following resource collects some of the most active Yellow Vests initiatives on social media: <https://www.pagesgiletsjaunes.fr/informations-nationales/>. A selection of the most active initiatives on are: Le France en colère; https://www.facebook.com/groups/277506326438568/?hc_ref=ARQkWNp5TyudJQ-gM9kRUYdQnc3cro6sR16bFGdHA69rXEiNrl9nLTEzV2bCibzz4Hg; Gilet jaune: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/310403819778193/>; Gilet jaunes Le 17 novembre: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/le17novembre/>; Les sous-marins jaunes: Nous ne sommes pas dupes: https://www.facebook.com/sousmarinsjaunes/?_tn_=%2Cd%2CkCH-R-R&eid=ARChKk68gssVVvlfvVqg8BbHwWBj9Nw1Bs2BC5b2SrERTdAz5SHokoLAjDJOSdZqmgF8_Xk7w5jw5amP&hc_ref=ARSFh2kHV0Oxy2OXYrIIXX0KWoh3derg6hcraAWiAX6a8-dv3ZBsdPUZG-N7s_GjTjQ&fref=nf&hc_location=group. La ligne jaune: <https://lalignejaune.fr/en>; and the only social media page making information available in English: Facebook, Gilets Jaunes Info in English: https://www.facebook.com/giletsjaunesinenglish/?_tn_=%2Cd%2CP-R&eid=ARAWvisLOIOA6jsFWJGXz7Ir98TtGTFGpOEI7NGBkMcQdVpCDImScqOI1kxpIb73egg4RObUcw1mlUAcS;

Even if the French government had hoped and forecasted through its instrumentalized national mass media the breathlessness of the movement and made numerous attempts to weaken and divide it by demonizing its participants as populists, sexists, racists, anti-Semites, homophobes, xenophobes, radicals, anarchists, ultras, extremists, etc., after more than a year of intense activity, the Yellow Vests Movement is still thriving. Its members have initiated the longest and largest, most diverse ongoing social protest that I have had the chance to witness in my lifetime (post May '68). Unprecedented also is the consistent level of support for the demonstrators by public opinion (widely above 50%, from surveys). Indeed, beyond its active members, representative of the large mass of the population directly affected by the economic distress and in an immediate state of emergency, are also those who may be a little better off but who, in fear for the future of their children and in compassion with their fellow citizens, also massively support the protests and call for change. In the last months, as the situation unfolds, the crowds of protesters have expanded even more; now enrolling university students and professional unions. Entering the protest late, students were largely motivated by one of their peers, Anas K., a 22 year old political science student from Lyon, who immolated himself by fire on November 8th 2019, in front of the university facilities, to expose his stress and inability to study and sustain his basic needs with 450 Euros a month and no family support.¹⁵ The government's lack of reaction to this gruesome act, which unfortunately echoes the acknowledgement that these are common conditions for students, is what sparked their mobilization. And just last month, all major French professional unions (CGT, FO, CFDT, UNSA, etc.) entered the conflict as well. On December 5th, 2019 they started an indefinite general strike (so far especially affecting the public transportation system and also disturbing the delivery of energy: car gas, electricity, etc.) with the intention to orchestrate a blockage of the country's economy. This new level of national mobilization follows the announcement of the retirement reform, which would disregard the arduousness of certain professions and push retirement's age to at least 64 years old, for anyone not protected by a special regime. So far, the only professional groups that have managed to maintain their special regime are politicians and the police protecting them, as well as few others such as truck drivers and plane pilots.

Overall, all the protestors operating the convergent struggles agree that personal interests should not replace collective interests. They want to oppose and expose social and fiscal inequalities and the restrictively profitable ways the current order goes by, in which authoritative politicians acting as businessmen sell off their country to profit themselves and the few wealthiest around them, while destroying the planet and subjecting their population to unbearable taxes, debts, and restrictions. In this context and despite government calls for a truce over the holiday period, and because of its disregard, disdain, and inability to manage the crisis, once again this year public disturbance was at its best.

Returning to the question of evaluating the power a symbol could generate, the best answer in regard to the Yellow Vests Movement may be found in the intensity of the repression it encounters. Since the beginning of the weekend's marches, the state's authoritative response to deter the demonstrators, even if not fully successful, has been alarming. In short, flashing or wearing a yellow vest today in France can be interpreted as apology for terrorism and subjected to a fine of 150 Euros, to police violence, arrest, prosecution, and even jail time. Many Yellow Vests demonstrators have already faced justice and unjustified exemplary sentences have been pronounced against them. Those brought to trial are in general defended by members of the collective *Robes noires, gilets jaunes* (Black dresses, yellow vests) a group of advocates and jurists created specifically for the occasion and taking on court cases involving Yellow Vests to defend them in hopes of better outcomes.¹⁶ Nevertheless, the repression is rough, for example pairs of goggles, gas masks, or helmets worn by demonstrators to protect themselves against tear gas and police batons have been considered by police and in court as intended weapons and have justified guilty decisions on pacifist protestors. Witnessing this parody of justice, a portion of the demonstrators returned home and into anonymity, while others have understood that if they give up their yellow vest, they will return to invisibility and lose their cause. Furthermore, there are unequivocally numerous occasions in which demonstrators were forced by police to take off their yellow vests to leave a protest, or to circulate freely in the street as if their yellow intentions could spill and spread onto the rest of the population.

¹⁵ On a rare occasion, this story was reported internationally, as here in *The New York Times*. "Student Sets Himself on Fire, Highlighting Broader Distress in France"

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/24/world/europe/france-student-protests.html> Accessed December 12, 2019.

¹⁶ *Robes noires et gilets jaunes*: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/979317812455821/> Accessed December 29, 2019.

More humorously, on the last 14th of July (national day in France), some protestors decided to join the celebrations in Paris, but to avoid being targeted they did not wear their yellow vests and instead brought yellow balloons; there were hilarious images circulating on social media showing policemen fighting and poking at yellow balloons in order to conceal any signs of protest from the television cameras and the heads of state from other countries invited to be present at the celebration. So, beyond the yellow vest itself, this year yellow as a color alone has gained an entire new meaning associated with rebellion and opposing the government's order.

Even if demonstrating is a constitutional right in France, some members of the movement have been banished from street protest based only on the assumption that they could try to engage into violent acts; this violates other constitutional rights, such as: freedom of expression and speech, freedom to circulate, and freedom to demonstrate. Similarly, the terminology used to qualify the yellow vests has gradually evolved in the instrumentalized mass media to refer to religious terrorism, with mention of “collective madness,” “violent destructive crowds,” “ultra-yellow,” “radical” or “radicalized” protestors. Everything is an attempt to make people believe that the protestors are violent and the police response is proportionate. Nonetheless, there are plenty of independent recordings from street demonstrations that prove the contrary, and the numbers of casualties as well as the gravity of the injuries and mutilations caused by police, using so called “defense weapons” turned into attack arsenals, is also shocking. Earlier this year, appalled by the level of police violence, the European Union Council, the European parliament, and the United Nations Council pointed out the authoritative response to the social conflict, warned the French state, and requested further investigations (this effected a mild recess of police violence against demonstrators after last spring). However, despite the numerous visual proofs of police abuse, which follows the government's orders, very few representatives of the authority have been investigated. The myth of the “police of the police,” an institution called IGPN in France (Inspection Générale de la Police Nationale: The General Inspection of National Police) is failing to identify the instigators of violence on the authoritative side. It must be said that police intervening on demonstrations commonly are conveniently not wearing their RIO numbers (*Referentiel des Identités et de l'Organisation*, identification numbers that must be worn by police at all times) and are often dressed in black, with masks, with no distinctive signs allowing to identify and prosecute them. According to the Interior Minister relayed by IGPN, there are no examples of police violence occurring in the country and all charges against police have systematically been dismissed.

However, beyond the police batons, fingers are especially pointed at so called “semi-lethal weapons,” such as: GLI F4 *Grenades Lacrymogènes Instantanées* (tear gas launchers), LBD40 *Lanceurs de balles de defense* (rubber bullet guns), and GMD *grenade de désencerclement* (flash-bang grenades), which when used inappropriately or abusively (like being pointed directly to the face) have proven to be dangerously destructive.¹⁷ As a consequence, so far roughly estimated, there have been 867 serious injuries reported to IGPN: including 318 injuries from hits of shots to the head, 25 of which resulted in people losing an eye, at least 5 people had a hand blown off and 3 a foot blasted off by grenades, others have had ruptured organs, fractures, open skulls, and other severe wounds.¹⁸ They are also numerous disturbing testimonies of attacks on the margin of demonstrations by groups of enraged policemen without justification, in some cases on bystanders who did not even participate in the protest. The victims were usually young, many were women, some in wheelchairs. There is no limit to deter the movement, and humiliations as well as scare tactics generating traumas are part of it. Needless to say, the street medics that assist the wounded have been very busy; they themselves have been targeted by police (33 street medics were reported injured), along with journalists (166 injured), whose presence assisting and documenting the demonstrations is not welcomed by authority. Finally, there was one direct fatal casualty attributed to police by the movement but denied as such by authority and government.

¹⁷ These semi-lethal weapons, especially the last two, while still fully operational today in France are not allowed in other European countries as a means of mass control because of the risk of serious injuries or death that they present.

¹⁸ Independent media, *Mediapart* makes available a detailed count of the victims of police violence surrounding the Yellow Vests Movement, see: <https://www.mediapart.fr/studio/panoramique/allo-place-beauvau-cest-pour-un-bilan> Accessed December 28, 2019. These numbers are based on reports made since the beginning of the conflict by David Dufresne, writer, journalist, and documentarist who created a Twitter page where he makes his findings available: <https://twitter.com/davduf?lang=en> Accessed December 12, 2019. These sites show images of attacks and injuries that may be shocking for the sensibility of the reader.

In December 2018, Zineb Redouane, an 80-year-old woman of Algerian origin, was struck in the head by a tear gas canister (while she was in her apartment closing her shutters to avoid tear gas), during one of the earliest demonstrations in Marseille. She died in the hospital from her injuries.¹⁹ Overall in a little more than a year, the estimate is that close to 8,000 or more people have been injured (including police), with at least three quarters being demonstrators, and still counting.²⁰

Besides the weapons and doctrine adopted by police, the type of police being used to repress the Yellow Vests Movement should also be scrutinized, organized by level of dangerousness, there are: the gendarmes (the local police), the policiers (national police), then the CRS (*Compagnies Républicaines de Sécurité*: Republican Companies for Security) and PVM (*Peloton de Voltigeurs Motorisés*: Motorcycle Police Peloton) which are particularly aggressive units, both remembered for their harsh repressions of the demonstrations during May '68; and just created for the Yellow Vests Movement, the BRAV (*Brigade de Répression de l'Action Violente*: Brigade to Repress Violent Action), a new especially blood-thirsty unit composed of former members of the already feared BAC (*Brigades Anti-Criminalité*, Anti-Criminal Brigades) the equivalent of SWAT teams sent to the street to scare and tame the dissatisfied population. Even the general language has changed, from being called “the guardian of peace” [*gardiens de la paix*], police is now known under the authoritative title of “the forces of order” [*Forces de l'ordre*]. Thought to be unprecedented, it is now understood that the types of police, weaponry, and overall doctrine used in the current conflicts had already been experimented with and practiced in 2005 in the banlieues, during one of the most intense social conflicts in the French suburbs, which involved the immigrant population rising against authority. At the time, police manners effecting violence and injuries were not discussed; today, maybe because of the extensive use of personal video recording devices as well as the level of mobilization throughout the country, police violence cannot be hidden or denied anymore.

A message found on the back of a yellow vest worn by a demonstrator who is part of police (there are few) is enlightening: “Have you seen ‘individuals with a slogan on their back?’ A policeman from the 6th [arrondissement, Paris districts]. What is the most dangerous for democracy? A population in yellow vests. Finance in working order. Wishing to stifle pacifist revolutions, one makes inevitable violent revolutions.”²¹ Opposing that system are crowds of pacifist demonstrators shouting anti-capitalist and anti-privilege slogans and chants that have not stopped for more than a year, some of the most heard are: “Everybody hate the police,” “We are here, we are here, even if Macron does not want [us here], we are here, for the honor of the workers and for a better world, WE are here,” as well as: “We don’t give up... We don’t give up... We don’t give up...”²² And as the song that introduced this text says, none of the SOS, cries for help and change, or discontent exposed earlier will go away, it will return as long as social tensions and tangible issues are unresolved.

¹⁹ Read (in English): <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/french-authorities-mishandled-probe-algerian-death-190710101236211.html> Accessed August 8th, 2019.

²⁰ Not directly related to the Yellow Vests Movement but totally consequential of the climate of police violence growing in the country, there have been two other fatal casualties recorded: Steve Maia Caniço, 24, who drowned in the Loire river in June 2019 after police intervention and, just recently, Cédric Chouviat, 42 and father of 5, who died from asphyxia and fracture of the larynx, in the hands of police after his street interpellation (police using similar arrestation methods than those that already caused the polemic death of Adama Traoré, 24, in July 2016).

²¹ Plein le dos, Solidaires, <https://pleinledos.org/solidaires/> accessed December 22, 2019. “Avez-vous vu des ‘individus avec une mention dans le dos?’ Un policier du 6^{ème}. Qu’est-ce qui est le plus dangereux pour la démocratie? Le peuple en gilet jaune. La finance en ordre de marche. À vouloir étouffer les révolutions pacifiques, on rend inévitables les révolutions violentes.” The mention “Finance en ordre de marche” is a pun referring to LaREM (La République en Marche), the political party created by Emmanuel Macron to win the French election in 2016. His background is found in finance (something exceptional if one considers that former presidents usually came from either a political or military background). Also, typographically, the hand-written mention in the slogan of “pacifique” and “violente” embed the circled A, the anarchist symbol.

²² A popular street song since late 2018: “Tout le monde déteste la police,” “On est là, on est là, même si Macron ne veut pas, nous on est là, pour l’honneur des travailleurs et pour un monde meilleur, même si Macron ne veut pas, NOUS on est là.” And: “On lâche rien... On lâche rien... On lâche rien...”

Beyond the misery on which this all lays, as was understood in May '68 with slogans such as: "Beauty is in the street,"²³ there is something heartening in the fraternity and cohesion shown in the movement. To communicate broadly and reveal personal hardships only matters if there is someone to receive the message and if some people dare or are forced to look beyond themselves, beyond what they already know or what makes them feel comfortable, and the Yellow Vests have done that.²⁴

²³ "*La Beauté est dans la rue*" is a slogan originating from an iconic poster produced anonymously by the Atelier Populaire de l'École des Beaux-Arts, in Paris, during the uprising of May '68.

²⁴ A longer discussion by the same author on the theme of the correlation between visibility and social engagement is available in: "A Snapshot of Yellow Vests and Black Stripes," a contribution to Franz Vila's photography book, *Inveigle Term* (New York: NonPareil Studio), Spring 2020. Thanks to Jamie Smith.