

# **Between the Reaction and the Referendum**

**Nationalism and Direct Democracy in the Yellow Vest Movement**

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Alongside government repression, what poses a greater threat to the yellow vest movement—the reactionaries who are participating in order to present themselves as the alternative to Macron’s neoliberalism, or the reformists who aim to replace horizontal self-organization with new party structures and legislation? In the following analysis, we show how these two phenomena are connected. The rhetoric of direct democracy associated with the left in the occupation movements of 2011 has been taken up across the political spectrum, as reformists promote referendums as a substitute for the participatory power people have experienced in the streets.

In the following critique, we don’t mean to suggest that reactionaries or reformists have definitively gained the upper hand in the yellow vest movement. Many participants have taken a principled position against both kinds of cooptation. But in a heterogeneous movement like this one, the battles within the movement are just as significant as the struggle between the movement and the state. Those who prioritize fighting police over fighting nationalists are paving the way for nationalists to succeed neoliberals in power and implement even more repressive policies. Those who prioritize fighting fascists over confronting the neoliberal state create a situation in which the desperate and angry may conclude that fascists, not anti-fascists, represent the alternative to the prevailing order.

In the yellow vest movement, we see people from across the political spectrum employing tactics previously associated with anarchists and other marginalized groups to advance demands that are by no means radical. As we noted years ago, any movement that hopes to accomplish anything today will come into conflict with the police; but it marks a watershed moment in the fragmentation of society that today we see right-wing news sources approvingly circulating videos in which people fight police officers.

Anarchists and other rebels have carved out space for an anti-capitalist front in the movement by engaging in property destruction, which currently remains beyond the discourse of the far right. But there is no guarantee that this tactic cannot also be appropriated as well. Certainly, we can imagine anti-Semitic attacks on banks, after which anti-capitalist vandalism could be mistaken for—or used to promote—a new brand of authoritarianism. The same goes for the various practices associated with direct democracy. We should not imagine that any tactic speaks for itself apart from explicit proposals about how to reinvent our lives and our world.

Even when it becomes possible to topple governments, we must consider how this fits into a long-term strategy to regain power over our own lives on a horizontal and decentralized basis. Otherwise, overthrowing the government might simply provide the same sort of catharsis that an election does, concluding the period of tension and providing everyone with an occasion to exit the streets, pleased with themselves at having made history as they abandon the tools and connections with which they could have gone on reshaping it. There are parts of the world in which toppling governments is as common as voting them out of office—without this making people any freer.

Looking at what happened in Egypt in 2011–2013—and before that in Argentina, which went through five different presidents in ten days during the crisis of 2001–2002—it is clear that overthrowing a single government will not solve the problems that capitalism creates in our lives. We might conclude that the lesson is *don’t overthrow one government until you’re ready to overthrow the next one as well*, but that still doesn’t answer the question. If our chief goal is to develop self-organized networks capable of solving our problems directly, it might be better to go on contending with a weakened and unpopular government than a new government that

is widely perceived to be more legitimate than the previous one. This gives us a different metric by which to evaluate our effectiveness in social movements: it is not just a question of creating disorder as a means of *militant lobbying*, but rather of establishing the basis for a new way of living and spreading this as widely as possible. We will not be safe until no government can dictate the terms of our daily lives.

All that said, let's step back to look critically at the yellow vest movement and the various forces seeking to turn it away from egalitarian models of self-organization.

## **Dawn of the Yellow Vests**

The yellow vest movement emerged in response to the decision of centrist neoliberal French President Emmanuel Macron to increase fuel taxes—a greenwashing strategy aiming to make the poor pay for the transition to “ecological” capitalism. This angered many who were already financially precarious and dependent on their cars. But the tax reform was only the tip of the iceberg.

For years, consecutive left and right governments have imposed a variety of austerity measures in response to the 2008 financial crisis. Politicians and international agencies repeatedly demanded that people change their consumption patterns in order to save the financial system that caused the crisis in the first place.

After years of concessions, part of the population has realized that they always bear the burden of keeping the economy running. This was reinforced when President Macron, who had promised a new vision breaking with the “old political world,” opened his administration by reducing taxes on the income of the super-rich.

More and more people feel abandoned by the authorities as a whole. Some have turned towards populists of the left or far right, while others are developing a fierce defiance towards the system as a whole—without necessarily arriving at any sort of systemic solution. This helps explain why the yellow vest movement erupted.

## **A New Type of Movement?**

From the beginning, the yellow vest phenomenon represented a departure from traditional social movements. It has constantly shifted forms, changing its tactics and demands, remaining unpredictable and difficult to suppress. These constant changes present difficulties to anarchists and others who hope to spread ideas and open up anti-authoritarian spaces within the movement in hopes of pushing for more thoroughgoing forms of change. These difficulties are compounded by the political heterogeneity and confusion that characterize the movement.

Some comrades have argued that each nationwide day of action has changed the way people perceive reality in France. After the first act, the presidential palace became a target; the second act changed how people see the police; after the third act, some people saw the possibility of insurrection on the horizon; after the fourth, the massive police operation challenged our vague conceptions of what constitutes an authoritarian government; the fifth act turned attention away from Paris, typically the center of every political development in France; the sixth and seventh acts interrupted the Christmas holidays and the consumerism associated with them; while the

eight act of the movement suggested that it is possible to break free of the calendar itself—that ancient weapon for containing social struggles within the existing order.

The movement has also disrupted longstanding conceptions of political struggle. Social movements in France are mostly built around our personal relation to work and its world—trade union demonstrations, student struggles, railroad workers’ movements, and so on. By contrast, this movement emerged around issues related to consumption rather than production; it has not been driven by shared class consciousness but rather by common frustrations. This explains why the movement attracts people from so many different social and political backgrounds.

This analysis is developed in an article by Autonomies, which argues that the yellow vest movement represents a break with the historical conception of class struggle, as the so-called Arab Spring and various Occupy movements did elsewhere a few years ago.

Although the rhetoric of class struggle is not widely used within the movement, many participants are directing their anger towards politicians, banks, and others with institutional power; this suggests some sort of understanding of hierarchy and exploitation. Yet most of the criticisms we hear within the movement are aimed at individuals rather than the structures that give these people power. This reminds us of the ways that movements against “corruption” from Armenia to Brazil have channeled anger produced by the failures of capitalism and the state into efforts to demonize specific people, groups, or institutions, as if these systems premised on inequality could function in everyone’s best interest if only the right people were in power. Movements against “corruption”—rather than against capitalism and the state—have been useful for right-wing populists hoping to replace the reigning authorities in order to go on doing the same thing in their place.

Not everyone is pessimistic about the prospects of the movement in this regard. Asked if the yellow vest demonstrators had lost their class-consciousness, former Situationist Raoul Vaneigem answered:

“Yes, they are an example of this regression. But, as I have written, the proletarian consciousness that wrested its social benefits from the State was only a historical form of human consciousness. This consciousness is being reborn before our very eyes, reviving solidarity, generosity, hospitality, beauty, poetry, and all the values that, today, have been suffocated by profit-making efficiency.”

This movement also differs from those we have known in France over the past decade in that it started as a decentralized phenomenon on a nationwide scale. Since the beginning, the movement has appeared in major cities during demonstrations, but also on a local scale in the blockades of freeways, toll collection points, and traffic circles. The rejection of ordinary organization and structure enabled the movement to improvise. This gave the movement an advantage, confusing the repressive apparatus of the state on numerous occasions. According to some comrades, the real strength of the movement lies in its capacity for local organizing rather than the now-traditional Saturday spectacles and *coups de force*. According to them, continuing to occupy roads and traffic circles across the country is the only way to preserve the momentum of the movement. This might explain why the movement survived the Christmas holidays.

## The Movement as a Political Nebula

Raoul Vaneigem described this as “a heterogeneous movement, a nebula in which all kinds of politicized people and those who have dropped politics from their [everyday] preoccupations are all mixed together.”

The yellow vest movement has evolved continuously since it emerged. When the movement first took the spotlight on November 17, 2018, participants described it as a decentralized, horizontally organized, leaderless, “apolitical” movement. Only two weeks later, the movement made its first major turn.

On November 26, eight spokespersons were selected via online voting. In reintroducing some good old-fashioned hierarchy and centralization, some protesters hoped to establish unity in their ranks and initiate a dialogue with the government. At the time, these decisions created fractures in the movement, as some demonstrators rejected representation and negotiation as traps. After two unsuccessful attempts at dialogue, the spokespersons themselves stopped trying to negotiate with the authorities.

Little by little, these spokespeople grew more influential, becoming unofficial leaders. They are often interviewed by traditional media outlets; their social media platforms reach the furthest; they are the ones who propose events and organize actions. Parts of the yellow vest movement are now structured around these leading figures. However, as the movement radicalized, adopting confrontational tactics that anarchists and other rebels have used for decades now, it became difficult to maintain the fragile illusion of unity.

We can distinguish three different tendencies within the movement: an electoralist and “citizenist” current in favor of creating a new representational political project; a tendency aiming to negotiate with authorities, sharing some “legalism” with the aforementioned tendency; and an insurrectionary current, presenting no program but calling for the immediate resignation of President Macron and perhaps the toppling of the French government.

The week leading up to the nationwide day of action on December 15 marked an important turning point. The “legalist” elements of the movement managed to gain more power and legitimacy on account of several factors, including the concessions Macron offered on December 10; the unpredictable context following the Strasbourg attacks; and numerous demands that the protesters be “reasonable” and “non-violent,” including demands that they condemn “rioters.”

For the most part, the electoral and “legalist” tendencies within the movement were satisfied with the concessions and eager to shift from street confrontations to creating a respectable image in hopes of gaining more political leverage. To this end, many participants were willing to distance themselves from the most radical elements of the movement, even if the latter were the reason why the movement had gone so far in the first place. This is the fundamental irony of respectability politics: in seeking to appear well-behaved on the terms set by the state, would-be representatives of the people must reject the only tactics that could give their movements leverage, in the absence of which the state has no need of such mediators in the first place.

Confirming that part of the movement was shifting towards a more “legalist” path, the first signs and demands for a Citizens’ Initiative Referendum (RIC) appeared in the marches of December 15. At the same time, some yellow vesters searched other demonstrators’ bags in order to keep out potential “rioters,” while other previous participants in the movement simply stayed home as the politicians had encouraged them to.

Following the events of January 5, 2019, it seems that the insurrectionary yellow vest tendency survived this scission. Today, the movement appears to be divided between two major tendencies: a “legalist” current and a die-hard oppositional current. Tensions between these tendencies frequently break out, although it appears that yellow vesters of all tendencies now agree on one thing: the Citizens’ Initiative Referendum (RIC).

## What Lessons Can We Draw?

In an article entitled *Ten Lessons from the Yellow Vests*, the authors argue that we can learn from the movement in order to “contribute to its growth as an anti-capitalist insurgency, and ideally help it develop as a global movement against the pseudo-democracies that serve as increasingly thin cover for top-down class warfare.”

As we will see below, the implication that “true” democracy is the natural alternative to top-down class warfare is widespread in the movement, to such an extent that the pursuit of more direct democracy has become a substitute for the struggle against capitalism. This, too, is familiar from the Occupy movement and others like it; in fact, it dates at least to the French Revolution of 1848, if not before.

When the yellow vest movement first appeared, many anarchists discussed it from a distance, from the perspective of outsiders. The ambiguous demands and discourse made it difficult to know how to engage. In the end, some of us decided to get involved in the movement despite the fact that reactionary groups were also participating. This meant fighting on two fronts: against the state and the beneficiaries of capitalism, and also against fascists, nationalists, and other reactionaries. In this regard, we agree with the aforementioned authors when they argue that our approach to social movements should answer the following questions:

“How can I contribute to the parts of these movements that connect to my own politics, while also learning from them and engaging with them? What are the multiple tendencies at play, and where might they develop beyond the present moment?”

To these questions, we should also add another question: How can we ensure that our participation in the movement won’t benefit our adversaries, adding momentum to something that they can control, but we cannot?

We also agree with the authors that we should not understand any social movement as singular or monolithic. Every movement is a meeting point for many different groups and forces. This is why it is so important to prevent reactionaries from coopting them.

While we agree with the authors about the importance of expanding the political imagination in social movements, the yellow vest situation is more complex than it might seem from outside France. As the authors grant, the participants “do not share a single political agenda or come from a common political party or union.” Numerous fascists and nationalists are also fighting in the streets, using the movement as a platform to advance their political agendas. Shifts in the popular political imagination can open up horizons towards liberation, but they can also have the opposite effect.

Some of those who participated in the occupation of Syntagma Square in 2011 became anarchists; however, many more joined Syriza, lured by the promise of “direct democracy,” and still others joined the fascist party Golden Dawn. When anarchists fought fascists in Syntagma

Square, they were participating in a crucial battle for territory in the popular political imagination. So the escalation of conflict with the state is not inherently promising; it depends on who leads it and who benefits from it. It might simply create a crisis that a more reactionary political party can solve; it might enable fascists to appear to ordinary French people as heroes defending them from the police. The important question is what political vision and values are driving the movement and how the horizons of the participants shift in the process. At this point, despite all our efforts, we have significant concerns about what the ultimate outcome of the yellow vest movement will be.

It bears repeating: the presence of reactionary, nationalist, and fascist tendencies within the yellow vests movement has not decreased. We do not share Raoul Vaneigem's optimism when he says of the yellow vest protesters that "The global character of their anger prevents traditional representatives of the people from recuperating and manipulating the herd." This has yet to be seen.

Speaking of this, we are also skeptical regarding the authors' enthusiasm about the Citizens' Initiative Referendum (RIC). To us, the RIC is simply another reformist tool that would lead the yellow vest movement into the traps of institutionalization and participatory democracy. It is a tremendous mistake to imagine that this tool could somehow shift the power dynamics involved in government, even for a short time. As long as we are using approaches permitted within the existing political framework, the game will be rigged, and we will always be the ones to lose. Whereas the authors argue that "the RIC could also potentially help build confidence in people power, begin to shift the structural power dynamic, and eventually be a step toward a more revolutionary transformation," we believe it is more likely that this tool would be used to bring about reactionary changes—the Brexit vote is not far behind us. Concessions like the RIC are aimed at pacifying protesters and causing them to reinvest their faith in the legitimacy of centralized state power; they do not offer a step towards revolutionary transformation, but a step away from it. We will explore this in greater detail below.

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## Reactionary Aspects of the Movement

When we began reporting the events related to the yellow vest movement in France, we noted that fascists and far-right groups were working inside the movement to exploit it to advance their own agendas. A month and a half later, we can evaluate the effectiveness of their efforts.

In social movements, anarchists and anti-authoritarian rebels often confront reactionary forces. In France, this has usually occurred in traditional movements—for example, in movements that involve trade unions, in which nationalist, sexist, xenophobic, and authoritarian behaviors and discourse are common. Since the beginning of the yellow vest movement, these tendencies have been embraced by several parts of the movement.

It is complicated to speak of this, because centrist politicians and pundits have emphasized fascist participation in the yellow vest movement in hopes of discrediting it and frightening people out of participating. But if we do not address it, future developments will catch us flatfooted. Smashing up shopping districts together does not guarantee that the far right will not be the ultimate beneficiaries of this period of chaos.



Recently, the repeal of the law permitting same-sex marriage became the number one demand in an online consultation intended to collect yellow vest demands. Already, this indicates that the tools some protesters are demanding for a supposedly more participatory democracy will actually bring about more invasive and repressive government policies. Rather than trying to itemize every reactionary act since the yellow vest became a symbol of defiance, we will focus on two powerful tendencies within the movement.

## **A Soft Spot for Conspiracy Theories**

In the aftermath of the Strasbourg attack, conspiracy theories and xenophobic statements spread virally among several yellow vest groups. On some yellow vest pages, we could read posts such as: “To the politicians who are setting up terrorist attacks to establish the state of emergency and terrorize French people, we can see you”; “State emergency = no demonstration = no Fifth Act = Congratulations, Macron, what a genius”; “A terrorist attack was needed. Macron hasn’t found anything better than this to cancel the Fifth Act and scare people...”

These conspiracy theories were not only spread online, but were also repeated by some yellow vests spokespersons and leaders, such as Maxime Nicolle. Nicolle had already been interviewed by the French branch of *Russia Today*, a 24-hour news channel controlled by the Russian government; now he openly shared his doubts about the true nature of the Strasbourg attack.

Already, during previous Saturday demonstrations in Paris, we had seen signs and banners spreading conspiracy theories—for example, that the whole world is under the control of some secretive group, be it the banks, Jewish people, or the Illuminati. For example, during a blockade in Rungis—the largest fresh produce logistic platform in France—a comrade engaged in conversation with some yellow vesters who asserted that Macron was “the representative of the Rothschild bank.” Rather than a revolutionary analysis of capitalism, they were attempting to spread an anti-Semitic conspiracy theory.

These theories are extremely popular among the far right in general, but also among populist leftists and “*rouge-bruns*” (“brown-reds,” i.e., “left” fascists or “transversal populists” who mix populist ideas from the authoritarian left and the far right). The fact that such ideas are spreading within the movement should leave us with no doubt as to the political objectives of those who promote them.

## **A Fascination with the Ukrainian Revolution**

Another concerning issue emerged a week ago when Eric Drouet—an increasingly influential spokesperson of the yellow vest movement—was released from custody after his arrest on January 2, 2019. In an interview on national media, he said, “[Yellow vesters] need to use the media outlets as [the government] is using them. They try to describe us as anarchists, as rioters.”

While this statement seems trivial at first, the choice of words indicates Drouet’s political preferences. His use of “anarchists” and “rioters” is derogatory. Confronted with various corporate media attempts to portray the movement as far right or far left, Drouet pointedly chose to distance himself and the movement from anarchists and rioters, not from nationalists and fascists.

In a letter written in response to President Macron’s traditional New Year’s resolutions and wishes to the nation, Eric Drouet and his fellow group of yellow vesters stated: “The anger will

turn into hatred if you continue from your pedestal, you and those of your own kind, to consider the people at the grassroots as paupers and social outcasts. [...] Change your attitude and invite us around a table to discuss.” They continued their statement by rejecting the large national debate created by the President—describing it as “a political trap”—and concluded by saying “We will go even further. [...] Do not think that you are above the law and above the willpower of the French people” while making clear allusions to the Ukrainian revolution of 2013–2014.

Indeed, after watching the documentary “Winter on Fire,” some spokespersons of the yellow vest movement are now comparing their project to the uprising that took place in Ukraine several years ago when people gathered in the streets to protest President Yanukovich’s decision suspending the agreement between Ukraine and the European Union. This led to the occupation of the Maïdan—the central square of Kiev—generating a massive insurrection in which fascists played a key role.

Both of the most notorious yellow vest leaders, Eric Drouet and Maxime Nicolle, are absolutely convinced of the similarities between the two situations. Drouet says:

“At first in Ukraine, demonstrators were pacifist. It is similar to us in a way... [The government] didn’t let them demonstrate. It was really a dictatorship. This is really what is happening here too. They don’t let us march through Paris freely and they don’t let us do what we want.”

Sharing the same views on the current political and social context, Maxime Nicolle went further, assuring that “A lot of people in this movement are willing to die so our future can be better. [...] Some people are currently getting ready for a national upheaval.”

Here we see insurrection fetishized as a goal unto itself apart from any political objectives, or at least, avowed ones. Both leaders neglect the political, economic, and social differences between these two countries, fascinated with the possibility of overthrowing the government but withholding comment on what would emerge afterwards. The supposedly “apolitical” tone of their discourse weakens their analysis—or else conceals it. Glorifying the Ukrainian revolution, they do not address the civil war that ensued. Ironically, they also forget that the first Ukrainian demonstrations were pro-European, while many yellow vest protesters blame the European Union for their living conditions.

Bearing in mind the participation of nationalists and populists since the beginning of the movement, we can recognize the true significance of the Ukrainian revolution as a reference point. It appears that some currents within the yellow vest movement are embracing the possibility of an armed insurrection that would offer nationalists and fascists an important role—both during it and afterwards.

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## **The Phantom of Democracy**

Drouet and Nicolle do not represent the only reactionary tendency that wears a yellow vest. As the “legalizing” and “politicizing” of the movement unfolds, some participants are trying to transform it into a political party. One of their objectives is to present “yellow” candidates in the

forthcoming European elections of May 2019 or during the municipal elections of 2020. According to them, this would help the movement to “create some type of political program,” insuring against the danger that some “good will might eventually falter if they do not find a framework in which they can be expressed.”

This is an old story. There were similar attempts to form parties at the conclusion of the occupation movements of 2011; this failed in the United States on account of the two-party system, but it more or less succeeded in Spain and Greece—that is, it succeeded in transferring grassroots momentum into the spectator sport of electoral politics, which always ends in disappointment.

In our opinion, it would be no surprise if the yellow vest movement resulted in the creation of a new political party similar to the Five Star Movement (M5S) in Italy. In a text that we recommended in a previous article, the authors review the similarities and differences between the two movements.

According to them, the yellow vests and the M5S share the following characteristics:

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A similar social base composed of a right-wing middle class afraid of losing status; a disappointed left that no longer knows where to turn; and a large pool of isolated individuals who no longer trust trade unions and traditional parties.

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A feeling of general despondency that legitimizes an angry movement. Indeed, these movements function as a point of intersection for a wide range of disappointments and resentments.

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The movements in Italy and France both started as consumer movements, not as political movements, strictly speaking.

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They both use the same kind of rhetoric blaming and rejecting political elites, without offering any systemic criticism of capitalism or the state.

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Finally, both movements describe themselves as horizontal, advocating “direct democracy” as an end in itself.

On Saturday, January 5, 2019, in Marseilles, a legalist and electoralist group of yellow vesters announced the creation of “Yellow Vests, the Movement,” involving collective assemblies of citizens and a national organization in charge of coordinating the entire nonprofit and volunteer sector.

In Italy, the Five Star Movement ended up partnering with the quasi-fascist League to form the first populist government in Western Europe. The fetishizing of direct democracy as a technical means by which to empower the disenfranchised not only perpetuates the problem of asymmetrical by re-legitimizing government and centralized coercive power; it also offers cover for the far right to gain control through supposedly “apolitical” means.

## **The Citizens’ Initiative Referendum (RIC)**

Our fears about the future of the yellow vest movement are reinforced by the demand for the Citizens’ Initiative Referendum (RIC). In a short period of time, the idea of introducing this tool

of participatory democracy into the French political system has become so popular that it has practically eclipsed all the movement's previous demands.

Everywhere—on social media and national media, in the streets, during yellow vest demonstrations—discussion focuses on the referendum. Many demonstrators are hoping that thanks to the RIC, people will finally obtain power and self-determination—as if the movement had not just demonstrated for all to see just how much power we can wield when we take direct action, rather than relying on the mediation of democratic governance.

Directly inspired by an existing policy in Switzerland, the RIC would enable the government to consult citizens on major social and economic decisions. According to the RIC, if a petition receives a certain number of signatures, a referendum would take place on the issue at a local or national level. In theory, in its most radical iteration, this could even result in the dismissal of an elected representative.

In using the word “citizens,” the proposal emphasizes the distinction between two kinds of people: on one side, the legitimate, officially recognized “citizens,” and on the other side, the “others,” the excluded. In the current social climate, the xenophobic tone of this language is blatant enough. The inclusivity promised by the European Union is false, as it is based on a top-down statist framework that preserves and exacerbates tremendous power differentials, but democratic nationalism is no improvement. We have to show that genuine autonomy and horizontality based in solidarity and direct action represent an alternative to both sides of this dichotomy.

The far right has promoted this idea of a popular referendum for years. The same enthusiasm for direct democracy also produced the Brexit vote. In France, Marine Le Pen has long advocated for referendums. During her last presidential campaign, her political program already included the creation of a popular referendum for petitions that receive at least 500,000 signatures. Jean-Luc Mélenchon, leader of the populist leftist party *La France Insoumise*, has also officially reaffirmed his support for such an initiative. All this is instructive.

## **The RIC as a Reactionary Tool**

Radicals have circulated several articles online discussing the issues raised by the RIC. In a variety of ways, each according to a different political tendency, these analyses all express the same fundamental concern that this participatory political tool will play a reactionary role.

In an article entitled *Non à la RICupération!* the authors argue that this demand offers the government a way to resolve the political and social crisis and bring the yellow vest movement to a close without necessarily addressing the problems that precipitated it. The fact that the government itself is not opposed to this proposition bolsters this thesis.

For a movement premised on outrage against traditional politics, it is strange that the only demand to achieve widespread consensus is a traditional political proposal. We see here the lack of political imagination that afflicts the movement. The aforementioned authors explain that referendums are usually the field of professional politicians and traditional parties: “in the countries where some similar forms of political systems already exist, it is those exact same parties that are using these tools” for their own benefit.

In a world in which consensus reality is shaped by asymmetrical information warfare, those who control the news cycle can manipulate referendums just as effectively as they manipulate traditional representative democracy. There are many examples of political parties using popular

referendums to advance their agendas. In 2009, the Swiss far-right party (UDC) led a several-month political campaign against the construction of new minarets in Switzerland. This racist political campaign was simply an excuse to target Muslims—at the time of the vote, there were only four minarets in all Switzerland. The campaign generated a surge of racist attacks and ended in the victory of the far right. Via this referendum, the far right obtained a platform to popularize its xenophobic agenda.

It's worth noting that the result of this exercise in "direct democracy" was a government policy that was more invasive, restrictive, and repressive than what preceded it. More democracy does not mean more freedom—it often means less.

In 2017, a leftist Italian trade union (CGIL) led a political campaign against the Job Act of Matteo Renzi, a worse version of the infamous French *Loi Travail*. The union obtained the 500,000 signatures necessary for the referendum to take place but was blocked by the Constitutional Court. The latter said that the proposition was not "formulated well enough." In reality, the problem was that repealing the law would have forced the rehiring of millions of fired individuals, which was inconceivable for the Italian government—unemployment being a necessary aspect of capitalism. In the end, the referendum didn't take place at all, but street protests succeeded in forcing the authorities to remove some of the worst elements of the law.

We see here that the referendum didn't enable people to challenge a law they considered unfair; it was only their determination in the streets that won them some small improvements. It is never a good idea for those who oppose the reigning order to take for granted that its own mechanisms can do the work for them to change it.

On this issue, some comrades explained in a letter that "the RIC makes people believe that they can modify a Constitution, a Treaty, dismissing an elected representative or a president to change the rules of the system." Many yellow vest protesters imagine that the referendum would give them more power to influence the political decisions of the ruling class—or even that it could make them the ones making the decisions. This fails to take into consideration that the French political system is not a completely independent body; rather, it is connected to a global economic system involving many *vested interests* that will go to great lengths to redirect those who wish to play with direct democracy into discussions and debates that do not threaten their hegemony. As demonstrated by the aforementioned Swiss example, it is naïve to imagine that the only issues that would be raised for referendum by the RIC would necessarily be progressive or liberating.

Even with a Citizens' Initiative Referendum, the government will always have the last word, as it has at its disposal several powerful tools to change a popular "no" into a "yes." For example, at a local scale, the referendum about the Notre-Dame-des-Landes airport was calculated to ensure that people would answer "yes." Indeed, while this project affected all of Brittany, the area of the referendum was limited to the *Loire Atlantique* department alone, excluding the rest of the region. As a result, the "yes" votes won. Governments can determine the conditions and terms of a referendum, and they will go to great lengths to substitute referendums that reinforce their legitimacy for referendums that could threaten their stability and political hegemony. Once again—although the airport was cancelled, it was only because of fierce long-running grassroots struggles.

To some radicals, in addition to serving as an opportunity for the government to resolve the yellow vest crisis, this demand for more direct democracy is also a way for part of the movement to abdicate the power and potential that it has just discovered within itself. Perhaps some

participants are frightened at the thought of what they could accomplish and create themselves without the mediation of state institutions. The tremendous responsibility of being personally accountable for all the ways we can directly act to change the world can be terrifying indeed.

Finally, the demand for a Citizens' Initiative Referendum reflects a threat not just to the movement itself, but also for the long-term conditions and horizon of possibility in France. In the worst-case scenario, referendums would send radicals to the ballot box alone rather than out into the streets together, and the results would both consolidate and legitimize reactionary policies. On this issue, we have translated the concluding paragraphs of an article, which offers an overview of the far-right obsession with popular referendums:

## **The Referendum and the Far Right**

For several years now, the idea of the RIC has been promoted by Etienne Chouard, a professor of economy and management who became famous in 2005 during the referendum regarding the European constitutional treaty. A popular blogger among the various tendencies of the far-right—with whom he regularly shares the stage during conferences—he is surrounded by a network of activists named “the nice viruses” that appears to have been really active in yellow vest Facebook groups, as well as on several traffic circles. It is difficult today to measure their influence on the movement, but the sudden appearance of the RIC as a central demand could be the consequence of the activity of these longstanding organized militants on social media platforms.

The 2005 referendum—where the victory of the “no” was completely ignored by French authorities when they ratified the Lisbon treaty two years later, establishing the constitutional basis of the European Union—was seen by numerous people as proof that they had lost their sovereignty in relation to European institutions. In 2007, Chouard wrote: “We are deprived of the right of people to self-determination in favor of the right of representatives to dispose of people.” Since then, the citizens' initiative referendum has appeared in the political programs of several parties, from the UPR (the Popular Republican Union) to the National Front (*Rassemblement National*), not forgetting *Debout la France*, as a way to bring back sovereignty to the “French people.” Indeed, these parties believe that “French people” have been dispossessed of their sovereignty by the European Union—among others. This theory tends to forget too rapidly that these European authorities are made up of representatives of the several member States of the Union. Therefore, the European Union is not an off-ground political body, or a foreign superpower, but a space of power for representatives of different national bourgeoisies.

It is also important to note that far-right parties have a strong tendency to use the referendum tools in order to promote and advance their racist political agendas: the Hungarian referendum on establishing quotas for migrants, the vote against the building of new minarets in Switzerland, the proposal of Nicolas Dupont-Aignan (*Debout la France*) to organize a referendum in order to “stop the migratory subversion.”

## **The Referendum and the Ballots**

The RIC, like the traditional elections for representatives, is first and last a matter of putting a ballot in a ballot box. That is to say, it represents the abandoning of collective power for an

individualized approach, and the exclusion from the political field of people who lack French nationality. The RIC is not a solution to the *crisis of representation* that we witness at every election (massive abstention, confiscation of power by the bourgeoisie); it is a palliative that offers no real emancipatory horizon. Instead of demanding hypothetical referendums, let's remember the warning formulated by the Communards at the eve of the elections of March 26, 1871: "Let's keep in mind that the men who will serve you best are the ones you choose among yourselves, living the same lives as yours, suffering from the same evils." And let's not abandon the political fight as soon as we are finished with the ballot box: let's continue it in our districts, our workplaces, and why not, on the traffic circles, let's get organized and fight uncompromisingly for control of our lives.

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## Troubling Horizons

Since its beginning, the yellow vests movement has demonstrated a capacity to challenge the traditional conceptions and frameworks established by social movements, forcing anarchists and other anti-authoritarians to rethink and adapt their preconceived perceptions and strategies. One interesting aspect of this unusual movement is that, superficially, it has directly embraced principles popularized by radicals during the past decades: direct action, decentralization, the absence of leadership, no negotiation with the authorities. Yellow vesters from across the political spectrum have engaged in street confrontations in an insurrectionary manner, divided only by their ideals and aspirations. This is something we have not seen in France, even during the notorious social movements of the past decade.

The yellow vest movement is the legitimate expression of a deep collective frustration based in the social realities of the participants. However, from the beginning, this social ferment has carried reactionary seeds within it that were just waiting for a chance to germinate. This is not unusual for a movement involving so many different people, especially considering that the original pretension to being "apolitical" made it difficult to reject the far right as offering no desirable alternative to neoliberalism.

In response to this situation, for several weeks, a large "leftist" bloc appeared within the yellow vest movement, sharing some common ground in opposing capitalism and racism. This offered new opportunities and perspectives for parts of the movement, creating more space for participants from the periphery and intensifying the crisis.

Nevertheless, these efforts did not prevent reactionary and nationalist from using the movement as a platform for their ideas and agendas. Over the past weeks, some of the most influential yellow vest leaders have been utilizing rhetoric associated with the far right and other transversal populists. The popularity of the Citizens' Initiative Referendum (RIC) suggests that reactionary and nationalist ideas are not only popular among some grassroots groups, but also have traction among the legalist and institutional elements of the movement.

All this is not surprising; the ongoing economic crisis has increased the polarization of society towards both ends of the political spectrum, and those on the reactionary end of this spectrum are determined to present themselves as the opponents of the reigning order without offering any systemic solutions to the problems it causes. As some Greek comrades have pointed out, "despite

the intensity of riots, on the level of political discourse, there is no critique or questioning of the state as the guarantor of right and wellbeing, nor of capital as a social relation.” Who is to blame for this sterile or reactionary political discourse within the movement? Don’t anarchists also bear responsibility for this situation?

To some, it is indeed our responsibility, as anarchists, to engage in social movements—from inside, outside, or alongside, depending on our personal convictions—in order to connect revolutionary and emancipatory ideas with concrete actions. The idea is to open spaces not only for ourselves but also for others, developing new connections and creating ruptures with oppressive normality. In other words, “a movement is first of all what everyone is making out of it and what is really happening within it, beyond its fantasized representations and political subjects.”

We understand social movements as battlegrounds for different political forces, perspectives, and aspirations in a struggle for physical territory and also for the popular imagination. As some comrades argue, the extent of property destruction is not enough to estimate the potential subversive impact of a movement. The important thing is to what degree a movement succeeds in undermining assumptions about reality and giving the participants a basis from which to invest themselves in creating something else. In the case of the yellow vest movement, the rupture with everyday life could have opened up a radical questioning and criticism of it. According to the aforementioned authors, this has not occurred—or at least, the movement didn’t push its subversive potential far enough.

The fact that the yellow vest movement is falling for the ever-renewable scam and distraction of direct democracy is a consequence of this failure. It seems likely that this movement—or at least its legalist tendency—will arrive at the same impasse and disillusionment as the previous occupation movements in Spain, Greece, Turkey, Egypt, and the US. Anarchists still have a lot of work to do among grassroots and social movements to dispel the illusion that any form of state intervention or administration could make capitalism function in everyone’s interest. The question is not how to democratize the governing of society, but how to organize ourselves to transform it from the bottom up. The behavior of the police throughout the yellow vests movement—as well as during various students’ actions last December—should make it clear enough that the state exists to coerce and repress us in the interests of the powerful, not to solve our problems.

It remains an open question whether the far right will be able to consolidate their position in the public eye as “rebels” concerned with the wellbeing of “ordinary people.” If they are able to, we will arrive at the next stage in the onset of fascism.

Several questions remain. How can we make sure that the ways we participate in the yellow vest movement and others like it won’t be simply perceived as an “apolitical” expression of anger, giving nationalists a platform to take credit for our efforts? When we act to create a crisis, how do we prevent far right parties from capitalizing on it by promising a return to normal? How do we confront legalist and reactionary ideas within the movement? How should we prepare for the next round, in which we will either face a stronger repressive and authoritarian state or a massive nationalist and reactionary wave? But also—how can we reinforce our connections with everyone else in the streets and traffic circles?

What is certain is that right now, the most violent thing of all might be the return to normal. This is why, as the movement continues its frenetic course towards the unknown—another nationwide day of action is due on Saturday, January 12—we will continue to fight with unconditional love and uncompromising rage against all odds and towards uncertain futures.



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Between the Reaction and the Referendum  
Nationalism and Direct Democracy in the Yellow Vest Movement  
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