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# Networked social movements and radicalisation: yellow vests' cross-ideological horizon for underrepresented groups

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## ABSTRACT

This paper questions the opportunities that Yellow Vests as a Networked Social Movement (NETSM) created for politically underrepresented groups. Without a clear authority structure and a formal organisation, NETSMs challenge traditional leadership understandings. Nonetheless, their ability to determine precision in setting goals, demands, and strategies is disputed in the NETSM literature. Considering both aspects, the paper evaluates Yellow Vests' success in bridging two underrepresented groups inclined to radicalisation. The study rests on 77 interviews with young-adult French citizens who support Radical Right movements (n=40) or self-identify as Muslim in the public sphere of Paris and Lyon (n=37). I argue that Yellow Vests' baseline arguments (e.g., against the pension reform and tax hikes) were precise enough to be shared by our interlocutors. Meanwhile, our interlocutors left the group boundaries sufficiently imprecise so that the movement could reach beyond their parochial identities. Bringing the two features together, the movement opened up new (e.g., class-based) radicalisation possibilities other than those relying on the Islamist and nativist vocabularies. After analysing this combination of precision and imprecision in the context of several unresolved problems, I conclude that the movement's vulnerability emanates from its failure to refine the combination that initially symbolised a shared future imagination.

## Introduction

Focusing on Yellow Vests as a meeting point of various radicalisation processes, this study questions the opportunities and constraints Networked Social Movements (NETSMs) create for politically underrepresented groups. With the advent of the sociology of network society, the conceptual relevance of NETSMs in denoting relatively decentralised, flexible, and electronically based network forms became convincing for many (Castells 2000, 693; Juris 2004, 341; Clifton and de la Broise 2020; Schedlitzki and Edwards 2021, 179–180). As such, NETSMs represent an emancipatory venue for the politically underrepresented—i.e. those who are excluded from the traditional space of formal political activity. However, there are disagreements as to whether NETSMs are inherently leaderless, implicitly open to the conventional leadership modes and apparatuses, or based on a unique form of 'Autonomous Leadership' (Western 2014; Nikiporets-Takigawa 2017). Connectedly, a lack of precision in setting goals, demands, and strategies is among the uncertainties about NETSMs' actor quality. The protested actors (e.g. the Macron government in the context of Yellow Vests) often present them as non-negotiable, violent, and incomprehensible (ELABE 2018; Alvanou 2018; Donadio 2019; Kling

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and Gurri 2020). Taking these pros and cons together, this paper scrutinises how individuals participating in such decentralised networks see them from within, outside, or on the borderline.

While questioning Yellow Vests' ability to serve as a bridge between politically underrepresented groups, the paper focuses on NETSMs also as an intersection of various radicalisation processes—i.e. violent and non-violent. Their opposition to the traditional forms of authority offers radical solutions to chronic problems, which render them particularly attractive to the politically underrepresented. In this context, the term 'radical' means departing from the mainstream conduct of politics. As Pedwell described eloquently, it means maintaining the possibility of 'becoming otherwise' (Deleuze and Guattari 1994; cited in Pedwell 2019, 135). Having introduced this dimension of radicalisation, I evaluate Yellow Vests' success in embodying two politically underrepresented groups: the nativists rooted in rural France, exemplifying 'the places that do not matter' (Rodríguez-Pose 2018), and the migrant-origin Muslims from Paris and Lyon, marginalised in the political core (Fellag 2014; Lyons-Padilla et al. 2015).

Despite becoming a matter of public debate, Yellow Vests' ability to bring together such mutually exclusive groups remains empirically understudied. Triggered by opposition to a carbon tax in November 2018, the movement took its original name from the French motorists' yellow vests (Driscoll 2021). Although the first protesters were the 'white' French, predominantly from the rural areas (Kantor 2019; Algan et al. 2019), the mass support for the movement reached beyond this parochial identification, with help coming from 'the left' as well as people of colour. For many, it became a movement against precarity at this point (Kinniburgh 2019, 120; Driscoll 2021). While the movement lost momentum with mixed results (i.e. the withdrawal of the tax plan without a government change), many researchers discussed its legacy as the mobilisation of marginalised populations (Dodman 2019; Lobbedez 2022). The question I address in this context is whether overcoming the traditional counter-positions has become part of this legacy. I argue that losing steam does not necessarily mean losing horizon, given that the movement attracted appreciation for its cross-ideological message, even from the standpoint of the otherwise-parochial identities.

Different from the available studies that rely on opinion polls (Algan et al. 2019; Rouban 2019, 1305 in Dardonville 2020, 21), this paper rests on 77 interviews from the PRIME Youth ERC project with young-adult French citizens in Paris and Lyon who support the Radical Right movements ( $n = 40$ ) or self-identify as Muslim ( $n = 37$ ). What brought this sample together in the context of Yellow Vests is that the movement appeared in the interviews as one of the few mutually-appreciated reference points regardless of the baseline categorisation. Although there was no explicit reference to Yellow Vests in the questionnaire, most research participants mentioned it ( $n = 58$ ) almost always with understanding, appreciation, or self-identification ( $n = 53/77$ ;  $M = 56.8\%$ ,  $N = 80\%$ ).

Firstly, I will discuss the contexts in which (im)precision – i.e. the quality of being (in)exact – worked for Yellow Vests. My discussion will first highlight how Yellow Vests' arguments about economic inequalities, social aid, high taxes, and discontent with traditional politics were precise in that they could be recognised and reproduced by our interlocutors. On the flip side, our interlocutors left the group boundaries imprecise, which gave the organisation the capacity to appeal to the entire citizenry instead of parochial identities. The movement's anti-normativity, spontaneity, leaderlessness and non-hierarchy signify a productive social context for our interviewees to break free from their bounded identities. Representing a cross-ideological horizon, Yellow Vests opened up new (e.g. class-based) radicalisation possibilities for individuals that otherwise rely on the Islamist and nativist vocabularies.

However, the capacity to appeal to the entire citizenry does not warrant the translation of this energy into an organised political expression. Having clarified the characteristics that gave Yellow Vests a cross-ideological representative quality, I will discuss the contexts in which NETSMs' (im)precision became counterproductive for the groups under scrutiny. This section illustrates several unresolved problems that hindered the collective action of our interlocutors, including organisational issues (e.g., miscommunication between violent and non-violent radicalisms), explosive

ideological clashes (e.g., the domination of white supremacists or the Antifa), and structural limits (e.g., the urban-rural divide).

Perceiving Yellow Vests as a case of falling under the hegemony of violence, ‘right’ or ‘left-wing’ groups, or the rural white men brought the movement to the brink of precision. I argue that the movement’s failure to transform the riots into an organised political expression does not emanate from its imprecision as a NETSM but its failure to refine its combination of precision and imprecision, which could initially symbolise a shared future imagination for different groups. Bringing together this limitation with the cross-ideological horizon of the movement, I conclude that Yellow Vests’ legacy will persist as long as the demand for re-socialising the atomised segments of French society survives.

## Network societies and the radicalisation of the underrepresented

As demonstrated by a series of mass protests in the recent past (Tufekci 2017; Hänska Ahy 2016; Donovan 2018; Álvarez de Andrés, Campos, and Zapata 2015; Chrona and Bee 2017; Mundt, Ross, and Burnett 2018), the movements without a clear authority structure and a formal organisation challenge the traditional understandings of leadership. Their spontaneity, affective underpinnings, and modes of space and spectacles make them unique actors (Western 2014; Keshtiban, Callahan, and Harris 2021). Previous research explained the diversity of forms, technologies, and institutional contexts in which network societies appear (Castells 2004, 2015; Bennett and Segerberg 2015).

Beyond the diversity of network societies, each network society’s in-group diversity also deserves scholarly attention. This inquiry is essential to underpin the originality of the concept of NETSM, which emphasises inclusion, autonomy, mutualism, and decentralisation (Juris 2004; Western 2014; Gillan 2017; Keshtiban, Callahan, and Harris 2021). According to the critiques of centralised power, their intersection offers a fertile ground for politically underrepresented groups—i.e. those excluded in the traditional space of formal political activity and, hence, at odds with the prevailing political order and normativity. In this vein, network activities became a pillar of the deliberative democratic public sphere theory, which, based primarily on Habermas’s arguments, identified decentralisation via the internet as the expansion of citizen deliberation (Dahlberg 2007; Iosifidis and Wheeler 2015).

Radicalisation relates to such imaginations of NETSM in several ways. Firstly, agents who reach beyond their gated communities can embrace another form of radicalism, refashioning their problems, solutions, or methods. The NETSMs might be capable of opening up a cross-ideological space, bringing together the otherwise-polarised groups. Indeed, there are narrow portrayals of Yellow Vests as a far-right (Bauer-Babef 2022) or left-wing movement (Cointet et al. 2021). Similarly, some studies interpreted the movement based on the premise that it signifies an individual-level radicalisation into violence (Mahfud and Adam-Troian 2021). Others recognised the participants’ ideological (e.g. nativism and Islamism) and methodical diversity (e.g. violent and non-violent radicalisms) (Doron and Kornblit, 2020). A group of studies also recognised Yellow Vests’ success in mobilising different identities against the decline in purchasing power (Cometti 2019; May 2019). According to Roy (2022), Yellow Vests represented an anti-normative demand for re-socialising the individualised and compartmentalised society—i.e. a society in a cultural crisis (see also Devellennes 2021 on ugliness). Those who ‘no longer have the space’ for socialisation met at the roundabout, regardless of their identities (Mahler 2023).

Secondly, the social movements literature is one of the few in social sciences that insists on taking radicalisation as a possibly constructive process, rather than taking it necessarily as a destructive transition to violent extremism. Deliberative democrats describe their conception of democracy as ‘radical’ because they aim to ‘democratise the democracies’ further (Warren 1996; Cohen 2009; Kaya 2021). Integrating hitherto underrepresented groups into civic deliberation is part of this project. Their post-Marxist critiques argue that the deliberative model is radical only in the sense that it creates a ‘radical exclusion’ by reifying value-laden concepts, such as rationality and democracy, which necessarily entail exclusion (Dahlberg 2007, 54–55). Alternatively, drawing on the writings of

Laclau and Mouffe (Smith 1998), Dahlberg (2007) offers 'discursive radicalism', which represents the excluded and prevents any discursive system, such as that of rationality, from delegitimising its adversaries.

Here come the benefits of imprecision for NETSMs. They operate in the organisational fields that rest increasingly on an inclusive notion of solidarity (Kousis and Lahusen 2021). While resetting the political grammar, many social movements produce slogans to prove their inclusiveness: 'we are 99%' (see Candón-Mena 2018, 574; Randol 2020). The imprecision in universalising the group identity provides an emergency exit for agents stuck in their bounded identities and social strata. Hence, while keeping their 'dissatisfaction towards the political-institutional system' (Robert and Kaya in this volume), radicalising individuals may learn to express their frustration by employing other ideologies.

The repercussions of NETSMs' precision and imprecision remain understudied. This paper aims to address the gap. After clarifying the interview sources and methodology behind this paper, the following sections will first identify the indicators of political underrepresentation. Then, I will question Yellow Vests as a cross-ideological horizon that enabled the two otherwise-polarised groups to foresee a more inclusive future.

## Materials and methods

### Sampling

The research rests on 77 semi-structured interviews conducted with individuals who self-identify as Muslims or support the Radical Right movements in France. Our Muslim interlocutors are also French natives and self-identify as such but did not base their identifications on an exclusive definition of the native. The sample type 'native', however, refers to our participants who made their ideologies based on an exclusionary use of categories such as 'French by heart', 'French by origin', or 'French on paper'. As such, I take them as the ideological representations of the nativist strand in France. The two main limitations in our 'native' sample were the lack of (1) female participants and (2) individuals who continue to live in the rural areas of France. Interlocutors have been recruited through snowball sampling. Though the initial aim was not to include more than two friends/relatives, the COVID restrictions and the difficulties in accessing several organisations, such as the outlawed Generation Identity, pushed for a modest change in this policy.

### Recruitment zones and techniques

The religious, civil society and political organisations were at the centre of our recruitment. Among these are Turkish state-led or private organisations such as *Milli Görüş* (National Outlook) and DITIB (Turkish-Islamic Union for Religious Affairs) and the mosques funded by the Moroccan state and charities. The Radical Right organisations we reached include the National Rally, Reconquête, French Action, the Rally for France, and Union for a Popular Movement. I used pseudonyms throughout the chapter to protect the personal data of the research participants. Most interviews were conducted in Paris, Lyon and Grenoble (Table 1).

**Table 1.** The PRIME Youth ERC Project (ISLAM-OPHOB-ISM, No: 785934).

Interviews						
France Self-identification (Muslim, Native)	Paris		Lyon		Other	
	M	N	M	N	M	N
Interlocutors (Male)	4	5	9	22	2	8
Interlocutors (Female)	8	3	14	1	0	1
Median Age	26,9	27,5	25,5	24,78	27	25,4

## **Interviewing**

The interviews lasted about 90 minutes on average. During them, the PRIME Youth field researcher asked our interlocutors to discuss their thoughts on the current state of French politics and economics, their political participation, and future expectations. We also asked about their personal histories, neighbourly relations, family and friendship ties, mobility history, and their views on diversity and religiosity. In the process, we did not mention any specific policy, event, political figure, religious or cultural value, or hot topic, including the 'Yellow Vests'. Taking the questions together, we aimed to invite them to narrativise their lives in concentric circles at the micro, meso, and macro levels (Bronfenbrenner 1977; Benevento, Koca, and Kaya 2022). The period in which the interviews took place – March-December 2020, and March-December 2021—prompted the question of Yellow Vests as a contextual factor. In the questions about national politics and political participation, our interlocutors preferred to discuss the residues of the Yellow Vests in the aftermath of its heyday, i.e. a couple of years after the movement had split and (arguably) lost its momentum.

## **Coding and further analysis**

Based on our coding manual (Benevento, Koca, and Kaya 2022), each interview is coded into twelve principal codes on the above areas and 157 sub-codes that saturate each bullet point. These thematic codes helped me establish a general framework before delving deeper into the recurring themes illustrating our interlocutors' understanding of the Yellow Vests. While the coding manual assumes that each code represents a value, this article goes beyond normative statements and reviews the coding material in the form of knowledge claims (e.g., why do Yellow Vests fail/succeed) and personal experiences (e.g., why not joining Yellow Vests despite supporting them). After this re-interpretation, the codes became helpful in analysing the contours of political underrepresentation, the demands for socialisation with other political orientations, and the ideational and material limits to organisational activity.

## **Intercoder reliability**

All 77 interviews were processed through the NVIVO software package and coded by me, the author of this article. Although the interview data will be opened upon completing the PRIME Youth project in January 2024, the paper will note down all citations from the interviews to facilitate further investigation. After considering the following codes in the context of underrepresentation, I introduce several themes that make sense in our interlocutors' relationship with Yellow Vests. In these sections, I refer to the interviews not as classifiable and quantifiable objects of study but primarily as standalone sources that require further scrutiny. While following this approach, I also aim to bridge the numerical generalisations with the narrative specifications.

## **Characteristics of the sample: underrepresentation and its indicators**

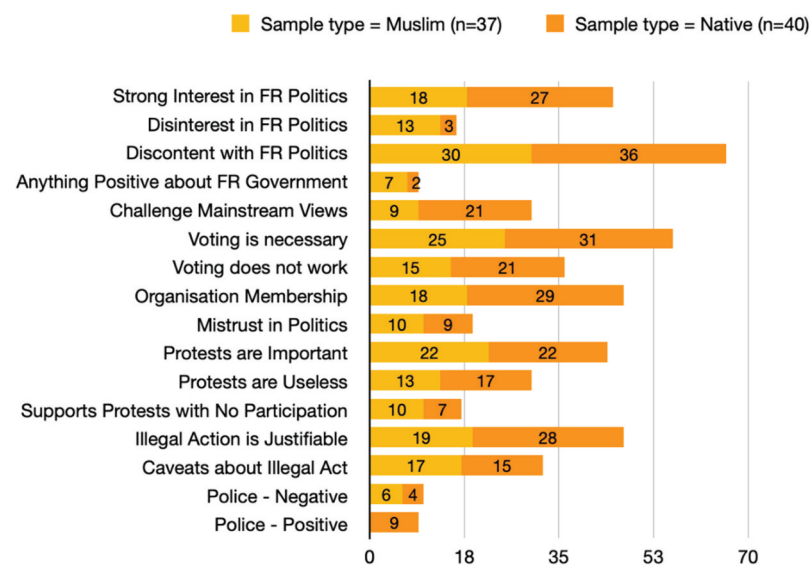
The starting point of the article is its inclusion of politically underrepresented actors. To measure the accuracy of this case selection, I identified 16 codes that relate to the underrepresented political stance of our interlocutors ("Appendix" 2023). These codes combine a set of value expressions, knowledge claims and personal experiences. Regardless of the basic sample types described above, our research participants shared discontent with the political developments in France, disappointment with the inefficiency of voting, sentiments against the mainstream political agents and opinions, and mistrust towards French politics (e.g. the political culture and institutions). Perhaps because we reached our Muslim interlocutors from social organisations and nativists from the political ones, the latter had more interest in the country's politics: 'It's obvious, given the context in which we met' (PYI-FR 1 March 2020) ( $M = 18/37$ ;  $N = 27/40$ ). By the same token, more of the

Muslims in our sample grew a disinterest in daily politics: ‘Quite frankly, I have not kept up with recent political developments’ (PYI-FR 11 June 2020) ( $M = 13/37$ ;  $N = 3/40$ ).

According to the data introduced in Table 2, Both groups expressed little support for the Macron government and its policies at the time of the interviews. Concomitantly, many of them also challenged the mainstream ideas from the routinised forms of activism to repetitive procedures and politically correct expressions: ‘nobody has the guts to change something’ (PYI-FR 9 February 2021) ( $M = 24.3\%$ ;  $N = 52.5\%$ ). The relatively hesitant attitude of Muslims was related to their fear of being othered and associated with Jihadi violent extremism.

Yet another sign of their underrepresentation is our interlocutors’ frustration with the ineffectiveness of their votes ( $M = 40.5\%$ ;  $N = 52.5\%$ ), even though a majority of them find voting necessary: ‘Maybe voting would be efficient in a real democracy, but not in the current framework’ (PYI-FR 1 March 2020) ( $M = 67.6\%$ ;  $N = 77.5\%$ ). Consequentially, a smaller group of them express a total mistrust of the art of politics in France with references to the monopoly of the enlightenment philosophy, the hegemony of specific lobbies, or a fundamentally flawed political architecture ( $M = 27.0\%$ ;  $N = 22.5\%$ ). Our results correspond with the broader literature that indicates these groups’ disaffection with the political system (Egger and Magni-Berton 2021, 59). The most explicit reiteration of this argument was one of our interlocutors’ definition of the Yellow Vests as an embodiment of ‘the mistrust towards power’ (PYI-FR 19 May 2020).

**Table 2.** The indicators of political underrepresentation in the PRIME Youth project sample.



## Findings: Imagining a boundless self in (Im)precision

### *Self-identified Muslims’ support for the yellow vests*

The consistency between our interlocutors’ definitions of the Yellow Vests suggests that the movement did not have a problem constructing a common identity. Including relatively comprehensive (e.g. a social-class movement) or minimalistic understandings of the movement (e.g. a common objection to a social aid policy), they identified the movement as a genuine social-class struggle irrespective of the other political divisions they reproduced in other parts of their narratives (e.g.

migrants versus natives; the religious versus the secular). In the interest of their narratives about the Yellow Vests, the reference point was more often 'the people', 'the masses', 'the citizens', or 'the crowds' than any specified group. As such, the 'Muslim' sample type did not include religious particularist readings in this particular case.

Their emphases on Yellow Vests' economic and spatial deprivation crosscut the particularities of them and their adversaries (e.g. the White, nativist) that appear in the rest of their narratives. Leaving these cleavages aside was often promoted in the narratives as a matter of collective emancipation (e.g. striving for others' rights) rather than relative loss (e.g. assimilating to the other). For instance, Abdelhaq made clear his short yet meaningful demonstration record for the sake of Muslims and 'the people':

I demonstrated once for Palestine, but that was a long time ago—in 2014, I believe. The other times, I didn't demonstrate, except with the Yellow Vests. Once, I walked in the street with a group of Yellow Vests: I wanted to show them my solidarity because this movement was a show of force from a portion of the people, those who live outside the big cities. It is a problem that this part of the population is never heard of. (PYI-FR 14 Jul 2020)

Abdelhaq described his reasons for raising his voice from Paris in the name of the inhabitants of the rural areas. Accordingly, they were in a subaltern position in the media landscape, just as the French Muslims are: 'the portrayal of Muslims in the media has nothing to do with what I know [about them]' (PYI-FR 14 July 2020). Another interlocutor, Abbas, who described France as 'the North Korea of Muslims' could also set aside this criticism while focusing on the frustration of 'some social classes', which he defined as the embodiment of the Yellow Vests, with economic liberalism and the 'plus-plus liberal' government party (PYI-FR 6 September 2020). In a similar vein, Sema asked while describing the agency behind the protests: 'where are the working classes in [Macron's] policy' (PYI-FR 19 February 2021)?

In this horizon generated by Yellow Vests, the grandiose public debate centred on Islam was recalled by our interlocutors as diverting the attention from Yellow Vests. 'We have the Yellow Vests and so on [other issues]. Why [are we] looking elsewhere', asks Murat while referring to Macron's quarrel with Erdoğan (PYI-FR 6 March 2020). 'As a French', Murat acknowledges the Yellow Vests as an effect of the deep-seated problems in France. According to him, the traditional media censors the movement while occupying public opinion with divisive images of Islam. 'It's probably related to Islamophobia', he concludes. Similarly, Adil (24) argued that 'France' hides its corrupt political order by diverting the attention from Yellow Vests to 'the Arab from the suburb' and 'the headscarf' (PYI-FR 2 March 2021).

Embracing the slogans for the redistribution of wealth and tax reduction, some Muslim participants did more than express sympathy. They joined the protests or their offshoots in other locations. Leyla could not attend the core activity, but in support of Yellow Vests, she attended several demonstrations and blockades at school against the pension reform (PYI-FR 11 June 2020). Having followed the protests, Ayşe mentioned how she came to the realisation that street protests can become effective when made persistently: 'It's not enough to demonstrate once: you have to continue' (PYI-FR 8 March 2021).

In the narratives, Yellow Vests did not need a particularistic identity to gain actor quality. Self-identifying as a French man in the context of Yellow Vests, Ayman expressed his pride in being a part of the movement: 'We are envied by our European neighbours for our ability to mobilise' (PYI-FR 9 February 2021). Hassan describes the movement as one that came from 'the people', simple and without complication (PYI-FR 18 May 2020). Leyla argues that the movement resulted from the decline of the rights that 'our elders fought for' (PYI-FR 11 June 2020). Rhetorically uninterested in French politics, another research participant acknowledged the diversity in Yellow Vests while concluding that the movement echoes a legitimate concern for the disillusioned masses: 'If a lot of parties are not happy, it shows that there is a problem in society' (PYI-FR 12 September 2020). One interlocutor saw a resemblance between the demonstrations for George Floyd and Adama Traoré,<sup>1</sup> on the one hand, and the Yellow Vests on the other: 'it always makes noise, and that's positive. It



allows giving visibility to some issues, to some problems' (PYI-FR 17 February 2021). Hussein's (26) conclusion was that the popularity of the Yellow Vests proves 'we are the country of revolutions' (PYI-FR 9 February 2021). His statement was shared by many of our nativist participants, calling for action (PYI-FR 22 August 2020): 'Was the French Revolution declared at the prefecture?' In these descriptions, Yellow Vests' actor quality rests on the constructive power of uprisings in the collective French history.

### ***Isolating the yellow vests from the arsenal of nativist grievances***

In line with the NETSM literature, a key argument shared by our nativist interlocutors is that the Yellow Vests and their activities were not preorganised by a traditional form of leadership. Despite being a member of an old-school monarchist organisation founded in 1899, French Action, and an activist in the conventional sense of the term, Jean preferred Yellow Vests to be a different kind of organisation. His favourite feature of the Yellow Vests was that it was 'a spontaneous movement' led by 'the crowds' (PYI-FR 6 March 2020). Thanks to them, the protests attracted 'RN voters' as well as 'ex-trade unionists'. Very similarly, Michel (29) referred to the 'spontaneity' and 'disorganisation' of the movement as proof that 'these demos are coming from the basis [of the society]' (PYI-FR 5 March 2020). This feature of Yellow Vests is in stark contrast with the General Confederation of Labour protests, led 'from the top'. Emphasising the movement's bottom-up structure, one research participant argued, Yellow Vests led to more political outcomes in a few weeks than the left-wing trade unions could do in decades (PYI-FR 21 June 2021).

Connectedly, the movement satisfied the desire of some nativist interlocutors as it transcends their isolated political circles. According to Jean, the decentralised agency behind the protests rendered them superior and more legitimate as 'the crowds are not charmed without a valid reason' (PYI-FR 6 March 2020). Max distinguished between his participation in the demonstrations against 'Islamisation' and 'migration' with the Yellow Vests as a 'mass demonstration', where 'thousands of people were present' (PYI-FR 19 May 2020). Also accustomed to the traditional forms of mobilisation as an RN member, Pascal expressed his admiration for the Yellow Vests just because of the movement's 'independent' structure. His verdict on the movement was powerful: "the Yellow Vests' demands [...] are those of the French" (PYI-FR 21 May 2020). In the same vein, Gervais (25) seemed content to describe it as a 'citizens' movement' despite calling oneself more parochially a 'rather right-wing, conservative' person (PYI-FR 27 February 2021). Similarly, Éliott (18) gave credit to the movement because it represented a reaction beyond that of the Radical Right against Macron: 'it was a challenge to the political system as a whole' (PYI-FR 11 September 2020). Having years of right-wing activism, Arnaud (30) reported that he formed a 'courteous dialogue' with the left-wing people he shares on the Yellow Vests' social media page (PYI-FR 11 June 2021). Finally, a Zemmour supporter, Adrien (30), shared his amazement with the link Yellow Vests established between people with different ideologies (PYI-FR 25 August 2021).

A defining feature of the movement was its representations against economic globalisation. Broadening the scope of the tension, Mylan (25) concluded that Yellow Vests are the 'losers of globalisation', which he identified as consumerism and mass and instant consumption (PYI-FR 9 July 2020). Like Mylan, who rationalised Yellow Vests based on the divergence between economic centres and rural areas, Matis (25) referred to the opposition between 'the metropolis' and 'the province', the large and medium-sized cities and the countryside. The insulting label, *beauf* (en. redneck), used for the uneducated white people in the countryside, became an identity to be embraced by some Yellow Vests. When Zacharie's (29) mother denigrated the movement as 'beaufs', Zacharie responded as follows: 'they are beaufs like us [...] if your banker is against them, then normally, it makes sense to be in favour of Yellow Vests' (PYI-FR 29 November 2020). Another marker to be embraced was *France d'en bas* (en. France from below), coined by the liberal-conservative politician Jean-Pierre Raffarin to label the precarious masses as opposed to the political and economic elites (PYI-FR 24 May 2021).

Instead of dominating, the nativist repertoire accompanied the Radical Right sympathisers' essentially class-based understanding of Yellow Vests. 'If [the Yellow Vests] took the streets, it's because of a tax hike', says Mickael (23). Although his grievances in the sentences before and after this statement is about the Great Replacement of the native French by the invaders, Mickael acknowledges the separate root cause of Yellow Vests (PYI-FR 1 March 2020). His diagnosis is based on social class instead of ethnic, religious, or national ones. According to Adam, the movement is constituted of angry railway workers who raise their voices against the pension reform (PYI-FR 1 March 2020). Lyam offered a conceptual refinement, describing the movement as a consequence of 'the middle and working classes' against tiresome working conditions for underpaid jobs (PYI-FR 16 June 2020).

Given that the movement was not limited by the arsenal of nativist grievances, supporting it required a cost-benefit analysis in the name of the Radical Right: 'the [Yellow Vest] demonstration is not an end in itself: it is just a means' (PYI-FR 12 June 2020). Matteo used these words to rationalise his active participation in the Yellow Vests protests, which he describes minimally as 'social demos' against the pension reform and budget cuts. For him, participating in the broader society could increase the threat to the government, ultimately bringing a change in favour of Asselineau's nationalist Popular Republican Union. Similarly, without declaring Yellow Vests a right-wing movement, Lyam used simple terms to reconcile the class-based frustrations with the broader right-wing claims: 'the [. . .] nation is made possible by the greatness of its people. Today, however, [. . .] teachers are fed up with their working conditions' (PYI-FR 16 June 2020).

### **Discussion: lost horizon or lost steam**

Whether Yellow Vests withered away or decelerated with the Covid lockdowns remains speculation even among our interlocutors who attended the protests, let alone observers. At least thirteen acknowledged the lockdown's direct negative influence on the movement. Mainly referring to state authoritarianism (PYI-FR 17 February 2021) and the mismanagement of the health sector (PYI-FR 19 February 2021; 21 May 2020), some in this group saw the period as an incubation period before a grander uprising: 'more radical version than the Yellow Vests will come, in the future' (PYI-FR 22 August 2020). In other words, according to them, Yellow Vests are far from becoming obsolete. Its cross-ideological horizon, however, fails to prevent the movement's disorganised decision-making structures, vulnerability against traditional authorities, unprotection to schisms, and geographical boundaries.

### ***Disorganised violent and non-violent radicalisms***

While the Yellow Vests differed from the Occupy Protests in the rise of violence, 'violence did not affect widespread public approval' with the movement (Shultziner and Kornblit 2020). Although this finding is noteworthy in France as 'a country of revolutions', public approval does not mean active participation. Among our interlocutors, those who clarified their opposition to the pension reform and tax policies supported Yellow Vests but did not necessarily participate in the protests due to the movement's ambiguous approach toward violence. While most research participants expressed their views about the virtues and limits of violent activism, none mentioned a deliberative medium where the issues of operation among a group of decision-makers.

The disappointment with the use of violence was raised regardless of the sample types. While initially justifying the movement as the working classes' reaction to the government's incapacity, Lyam later grew ambivalent feelings about the movement due to 'the presence of breakers', 'vandals', and those who draw tags and put labels on the 'national monuments', such as Arc de Triomphe (PYI-FR 16 June 2020). He participated in the protest until 'the scum came'. Matis was happy to declare the 'victory' of Yellow Vests, but embarrassed to admit that so much violence was

needed for this triumph (PYI-FR 22 August 2020): ‘Does it mean that you have to be violent to be listened to?’

Despite their self-identification with the movement, our interlocutors described the other members of the movement often as inaccessible people. For example, despite expressing his support for the Yellow Vests, Hassan emphasised his discomfort with the violent means of protest that some protesters embraced. According to him, the mass mobilisation in favour of the movement was threatened by the nature of violent activism: ‘violence has an impact on the surface, but it erases the motivations behind it’ (PYI-FR 18 May 2020). Similarly, the possibility of ‘too much violence’ discouraged Mert from participating in this movement that he ideologically supported against the pension reform (PYI-FR 12 September 2020). Ayşe described the movement’s failure as its ‘degeneration into violence’ (PYI-FR 8 March 2021). Despite identifying themselves as parts of the action, they did not see themselves in a position to have a voice to change the course of events.

The argument that violence should be a means to the end also crosscuts the Muslim-Native dichotomy. Akin to Kaya’s description of the Muslim participants of the Banlieue Riots in 2005 (see Kaya 2009, 189), some participants justified using violence only selectively (e.g. against government buildings). One interlocutor maintained that harming private property, such as restaurants, would be counterproductive for the Yellow Vests as it would ‘alienate [the] other enemies [of the government] against themselves’ (PYI-FR 31 May 2020). Asmaa joined a Yellow Vests activity where a public building was occupied. She rationalised this ‘unconventional’ activity with a caveat: ‘Of course, provided that it is done without damaging anything [materially]’ (PYI-FR 17 February 2021).

After noting her delicate position as a jurist, another interlocutor described the Yellow Vests as a rare case of violent repression in which state violence can be responded to by violent activism (PYI-FR 25 July 2020). Hassan did not rule out the success violence brought: ‘[The protests] worked [i.e. gave result] because there was a conflict because there was violence’ (PYI-FR 3 April 2021). Though he was afraid to encourage others to commit violence in principle, he saw no other way, given that ‘the people’ were genuinely ‘threatened’. Thibault (27) thought that it was thanks to ‘a bit of violence’ in the protests that the government ‘tremble[d] a bit’ (PYI-FR 3 March 2020). ‘The government only respects force’, Alain (30) argued in justification for resorting to violent civil disobedience (PYI-FR 31 July 2021). France being a country of revolutions was a well-repeated phrase in the transcripts, which may explain why violence did not affect mass approval in the case of the Yellow Vests, unlike the BLM and other NETSMs.

### ***Surrendering to the traditional forms of authority***

Another bullet point is the movement’s failure to reconfigure itself in reaction to the domination of traditional authority, such as that of the French government. As an illustration, Gizem (29) insisted that ‘today, the movement has been stopped’ as it could not overcome Macron’s policy of provoking more violence ‘to scare’ people. According to her, the policy goes beyond Macron, given that, she argued as a Turkish-origin French, Erdoğan did the same in the interim period between two elections by saying, ‘if you don’t vote for me, [...] I won’t control the Kurds anymore’ (PYI-FR 3 June 2021). While explaining his reasons for losing faith in demonstrations following the ‘inefficiency’ of the Yellow Vests, Pascal (18) shifted the argument from the governments to the media representations: ‘we don’t talk about the substance, the demands, but we talk about [...] [the] thrash can fire’ (PYI-FR 21 May 2020). According to Maxime (30), the fatal weakness of the movement was that no state-level authority backed it explicitly: ‘[e]ven if Putin has sent messages of implicit support’ (PYI-FR 4 October 2020).

Part of the problem was the sluggish and interest-based action of fellow Yellow Vests. Adam lamented that ‘we’ (i.e. the Yellow Vests) are not sufficiently numerous and agile against ‘the system [that] reacts by violence’ (PYI-FR 1 March 2020). When the government did not react with violence, Mylan (25) argued, it was not because Macron respects the Yellow Vests, but because he realised he could ‘buy peace’. According to him, Yellow Vests sold peace, just like others in business and politics: ‘anyway, we do everything out of interest’ (PYI-FR 9 July 2020).

Many of the Yellow Vest sympathisers were not activists either. They distanced themselves from the movement while the seasoned activists professionalised it. Targeting the greed of these activists, Leyla (25) explains the failure: 'You shouldn't ask for the moon. The French sometimes ask for improbable things' (PYI-FR 11 June 2020). Offering 'extremes' does not suffice to make a concrete road map, according to Zainab, who appreciated the Macron government's economic prospects as opposed to the right-wing identity politics and the 'mess' on the French left (PYI-FR 27 August 2020).

On the Radical Right, the main fault line is between insurrectionary temptation and pro-state political order. An in-group cleavage in our sample was between those who spoke highly of the police ( $n = 9$ ), and those who othered police as a tool of the order to be changed ( $n = 4$ ). Interestingly, Samuel joined both groups, feeling the tension between the frustration of seeing Mélenchon 'against the police' at a time 'police stations are being attacked' and seeing Yellow Vests' 'blood' in the hands of 'the police, the BAC [Brigade anti-criminalité], the gendarmerie' (PYI-FR 25 May 2021). Our other interlocutors at the insurgency front referred to a discrepancy in police's tolerance towards left-wing protests, such as the march for Adama Traoré, and intolerance towards those they support. Among the latter, who are to be embraced, are Yellow Vests: 'Yellow Vests received LBD fire and teargas in their faces, but the government let the banned protests being organised' (PYI-FR 16 June 2020; *also see* PYI-FR 1 March 2020).

### ***Fear scenarios: the hijacking of the movement by others***

Many participants feared that their voices might be lost in the abyss as the movement could be hijacked at any time. Some interlocutors feared the dominance of a parochial group, whereas others feared the dominance of rival factions. As an illustration of the former, Mert asked the Yellow Vests protesters to develop some kind of ethics to keep the movement away from their narrower political agendas: 'I don't like the way the parties try to take over social movements for their own benefit' (PYI-FR 12 September 2020).

The argument was untenable for the participants who joined the movement to make it their own. A French Action member, Adam, stopped participating in the protests after seeing that 'we' may not be able to control the organisation:

Since the Yellow Vests movement, I am rather pessimistic about [the demonstrations]. We participated at the beginning, but then we stopped because it was becoming a mess because it was transforming into fights between the far-left and the far-right. It degenerated into clashes between the scums, the antifas and the anars on the one side, and the police on the other side. PYI-FR 1 Mar 2020

In Adam's words, the Yellow Vests have become the Red Vests in due course. Zacharie (29) and Arnaud (30) were disappointed with the increased weight of the left-wing repertoire: 'they sterilise any movement with a subversive potential' (PYI-FR 29 November 2020; PYI-FR 11 June 2021). Beyond the left, Maxime (30) rejected seeing migrant-origin citizens as part of the movement. It is because he counts 'four or five migrants' every day in the stores in his neighbourhood, who are buying 'large quantities of alcohol' and have enough money to waste (PYI-FR 4 October 2020). On the flip side, many of our migrant-origin interlocutors feared that the movement would be hijacked by white supremacists. Mohammed (28) expressed support for the movement's 'demand for more social equality' up until the point that 'some Yellow Vests refused veiled women' (PYI-FR 15 July 2021). Despite not withdrawing his support, he lost hope for the movement's survival, given such in-group divisions.

Some left the movement for this reason, whereas others joined for the same reason. Unlike those who limited the movement with the pension reform, tax hikes, or economic deprivation, Emmanuel denigrated them as 'economic demands without a real coherence'. By the time the movement's anti-Macron and populist stance became more explicit, he came on board (PYI-FR 12 August 2020).

### **Urban-rural divide and the location of Muslims**

The geographic dimension of the protests played a role in the participation of some migrant-origin interlocutors living in the isolated pockets of the core cities. As the protests have grown primarily in the rural areas of the country, self-identifying with them was not enough to participate in their activities: ‘unfortunately, they were not there’ (PYI-FR 25 July 2020). Our interlocutors from the predominantly Muslim neighbourhoods did not see a tangible activity around. Many of them either did not have a car to reach the heartland of the protests or lacked the means to represent Yellow Vests in their neighbourhoods. While some of the Radical Right supporters in our sample joined the protests in their cars, whether the convoy-driven anti-environmentalism defined the movement became another divergence point in our sample (e.g. see PYI-FR 17 August 2020).

The urban-rural divide also interacted with the surveillance of Muslims in the public sphere. Amid the campaigns of ‘Muslim deradicalisation’, they lacked the courage to go miles at the expense of being labelled as social revolutionaries: ‘Muslims do not mobilise to protest against that’ (PYI-FR 18 November 2020). After putting forward a series of anti-colonialist statements in her narrative, Aziza (28) interpreted police interference against Yellow Vests as a norm: ‘Unfortunately, it was not something new’ (PYI-FR 18 February 2021). Considering the possibility of doing anything ‘unconventional’ together with her feeling of ‘being under the spotlight’, Nora anticipated her future political activity: ‘I would never do that’ (PYI-FR 19 March 2021). Adnane appreciated the protesters as follows:

When farmers are not happy, and when they want their demands to be heard, they hit where it hurts. And it’s effective. The truckers, it’s the same. (PYI-FR 9 Feb 2021)

Having said that, he calculated his fortunes of participating in these protests in a hopeless manner:

Interviewer: Have you done anything unconventional [in terms of political activism]?

Adnane: I don’t know if I can do it. Honestly, I don’t think so, no. But I’m in favour of it. (PYI-FR 9 Feb 2021)

Leila also told our interviewer, ‘I support [the street demonstrations], but from a distance’, because she was afraid of the consequences (PYI-FR 24 February 2021).

### **Conclusion**

The Yellow Vests’ weakness did not emanate from its imprecision as a NETSM but from its failure to refine the initially well-established combination of precision and imprecision. The combination symbolised a shared future optimism for different and even clashing groups such as the migrant-origin Muslims and the nativists. Having sketched a horizon beyond the identitarian cleavage, Yellow Vests opened up new (e.g. class-based) radicalisation possibilities other than those relying on the Islamist and nativist vocabularies. Remarkably, they understood similar things from the movement (e.g. opposition to economic inequalities) and supported it with similar methods (e.g. making it immune to the ongoing identity conflicts). Beyond its service as a cross-ideological common denominator, the movement also included different ways of activism, including, albeit disorganised, violent and non-violent radicalisms.

However, Yellow Vests’ imprecision rendered it a narrow political project, promoting few clear policy demands for those left behind. The movement could not manifest an operable agenda in which the parties can coexist with the differences they seem eager to keep while supporting the movement. In this vein, there are many social contexts in which the stakeholders do not give up their foundational particularistic claims, despite supporting the movement. The nativists did not withdraw their anti-Muslim/migrant sentiments, and the Muslims clarified that they would not feel welcome among the ‘white vests’. Therefore, the movement did not nurture a political expression demonstrating how they would fit together beyond the precisely-addressed issues (i.e. tax hikes, pension reform).

Our interlocutors’ narratives suggest that a series of problems hindered collective action. These problems include organisational issues (e.g., miscommunication between violent and non-violent

radicalisms), explosive ideological clashes (e.g., the domination of white supremacists or the Antifa), and structural limits (e.g., the urban-rural divide). They all indicate how the NETSMs are ultimately embedded in the political and organisational fields in which they operate. The role of the French country context shall be questioned in terms of (1) high public approval for the movement despite its inclusion of violent radicalism, (2) the geographic (rather than ideational) distance between the underrepresented populations in rural areas and metropolitan cities, and (3) the regressive identity conflicts that the governments instrumentalise in order to appropriate radical political proposals.

## Note

1. George Floyd was a 46-year-old black American citizen, was murdered by a police officer. Adama Traoré was a black French citizen who died in custody after being restrained by police.

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## Data availability statement

This study rests on the dataset of the ERC Advanced Grant Project ISLAM-OPHOB-ISM (number 785934), consisting of individual interview material. Following the agreement with the European Research Council, the data will be made available in January 2024 at the European University Institute's ResData Repository (<http://euresdata.eui.eu/xmlui/>).

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