Introduction
The space-time of the *Gilets Jaunes*

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This small collection of essays is devoted to the *Gilet Jaunes*, a movement that since November 2018 has occupied the streets, roundabouts, political debates, social media, and social imaginaries.

In Europe, after the punishing austerity measures inflicted on Greece in 2015, the cycle of democratic uprisings that began in 2011 finally started to come to a close. At the same time, the failure of the attempt to translate the horizontal dimension of these movements vertically, into the form of the party – as in the case of *costruir pueblo* in "Podemos" (Errejón, Mouffe 2015) – gave way to other scenarios. The political scene seemed to tighten around a polarization between authoritarian neoliberalism and the rise of fascism: from Orban in Hungary to Salvini in Italy, in addition to Vox in Spain and Marine le Pen in France.[1] It seemed to be the masterwork of neoliberalism in crisis: having constructed the new fascism as its favoured alter-ego.

The uprising of the *Gilets Jaunes*, with its untimely character, turned this scene on its head. Week after week, "Act" after "Act", assembly after assembly, the *Gilets Jaunes*, with inventive force, courage, and irony, discovered not only the conditions of possibility but also the modes of expression which generate class struggle.

The recognition of this re-opening of the space-time of possibility is the first element which unites the articles collected here: when the authors speak of the class struggle, they do not do so simply by proposing another taxonomy of the "mobilized classes". They do so by investigating the futures that the *Gilets Jaunes* have initiated, at the intersection of economic, ecological and political struggle. The notion of "class" is indissociable from other notions which appear in the essays and which categorize the movement as one of "multitudes", "of the people", "ecological", "emancipatory", etc. Class does not represent a "synthesis" of this multiplicity internal to the real movement but rather a dynamic element, or the vector of its continuous transformation.[2]

These essays equally have an epistemological position in common. They begin *in medias res*: the "speaking out" of the *Gilets Jaunes* was as powerful as it was unexpected, inviting us not only to plunge ourselves in the movement but also to rethink the very meaning of this "plunge". It's as true for the researcher as for the militant: no vanguardist position makes sense in a movement expressing itself as a "platform of collective intelligence"[3], which makes militant research into a work of collective learning, the sharing of affects and the composition of forces. Research must therefore locate itself from the outset in this "common" of the movement, to try to release its internal tendencies, lines of convergence and divergence. This is done by experiencing the exchange of words and bodily contact; the rejection of expertise in favor of the rediscovery of experience.

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[1] On this "authoritarian polarization" see: Plateforme d'Enquêtes Militantes (2018a).

[2] See in this respect the intervention of Michael Hardt (2019) at the University of Paris Diderot on the March 4th on the *becoming-class* of the multitude (the *Gilets Jaunes*) as a "composition" and "intersection" of an internal multiplicity within the class.

[3] This is the way the *Gilets Jaunes* defined the Assembly of Assemblies, one of the autonomous institutions of the movement.

The best way to introduce this dossier of texts is to reconstruct the genesis of the movement, characterizing its three phases: digital gestation, spatial explosion, and temporal persistence. These phases correspond to the three fundamental dimensions of the space-time of the *Gilets Jaunes*.

Prequel

Films sometimes have the character of prophesy, and cinema can take the place of sociology in the analysis of tendencies. On the 26th of September 2018, two months before the uprising of the *Gilets Jaunes*, Pierre Schoeller presented *Un peuple et son roi* (The people and its king), a film focused on the first years of the French revolution (1789-1793), showing the detachment of Louis XVI from the insurgent people. Ironically, Emmanuel Macron, the president who announced his rise to power with a book entitled *Revolution*, found himself facing an unprecedented movement which brought back certain watchwords and images of this historical moment: the "end of privileges", the return to the "social question", the untimely eruption of these "new sans-culottes" onto the political scene, the chorus of "Revolution! Revolution!" chanted by the *Gilets Jaunes* on the Champs Elysées.

The story of Macron's enthronement is that of his detachment *ab origine* from his "people". Elected in the first round with only 18% of the votes, and in the second with 44%, not "by default, but in opposition" to the National Front (Balibar 2018), his project, rather than "reconciling France", as he solemnly declared during his electoral campaign, gave rise to a crisis of legitimacy of the institutions of the Fifth Republic, and in particular its executive. A series of names that traverse the social and political history of the country reappeared in public debate: "Caesarism", "Jupiterism", "charismatic power", "presidential monarchy". In referring to these statements, we do not, certainly, want to be trapped in the maze of an abstract critique of forms of power. On the contrary, we want to underline how the *Gilets Jaunes*, "breaking into public space" (Hayat 2019), have shown its material determinations. In other terms, it is a question of grasping the connotations of "class power" that Macron incarnates and represents, and putting these in relation to the generalized feeling at the heart of the *Gilets Jaunes*: "injustice" and "political dispossession", two fundamental notes heard throughout French society in the time of the *start-up nation*.

Macron's modernizing revolution rapidly gave way to a scenario from the *Ancien Régime*. The beginning of his five-year term was marked by the abolition of the Wealth tax (ISF)[4], replaced by the Real Estate Wealth Only tax (IFI). This inaugural symbol of Macron's mandate would earn him the title of "President of the rich". A set of other tax giveaways to the rentier class and to big financial capital defined the implementation of a neoliberal program, alongside the attack on railway worker contracts and the privatization of welfare institutions and public goods. In this context, it's unsurprising that, since the first day of the movement's explosion, the refusal of the "carbon tax" was linked to the demand for the "restoration of the Wealth tax", and to the slogan

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[4] The tax exemption in the Wealth tax was justified by Benjamin Griveaux, at that time a government spokesman, as a strategy to obtain the "lacking capital in our businesses", which is to say, to favour productive investment. As Frédéric Lordon has shown, this measure would not in fact favour any supplementary investment, since the "overwhelming majority of deeds which fill financial portfolios, and which from now on will escape any tax exemption, are actions taking place in secondary markets…" (Lordon 2017).

"Macron, resign!" In this triangular relation we find all the potential for the following developments of the movement. In other terms, the refusal of the "carbon tax", an indirect tax attempting to make the lower classes pay for ecological transition, is immediately linked to the demand that "those with much pay much, those with little pay little". The request for the resignation of the president is a direct and inevitable consequence of this. Which returns us to the fact that Macron and financial profits are indissociable: *simul stabunt, simul cadent* – they will stand together or fall together.

Thus, far from being an indeterminate "anti-tax revolt", as mainstream accounts had it, the *Gilets Jaunes* made the refusal of an unjust and punitive tax one of the starting points of their *becoming-class*.

Digital gestation

The starting point of the *Gilets Jaunes* was the online petition that Priscilla Ludosky, a self-employed woman in the Seine-en-Marne district of the Île-de-France region, launched on the 29th of May 2018, titled "For a reduction in fuel prices!"[5] The petition initially received few signatures, restricted to a relatively small group: in the country, there was no particular sign of protest against the announcement of the introduction of the carbon tax, the streets being instead invaded instead by the movements against the reform of railway worker contracts, and against the university selection process.

The leap occurred when after the summer, Ludosky managed to get on a local radio station to explain the reasons for her petition. This reached Éric Douet, a private truck driver from the same district as Ludosky, who created the Facebook event "All together, on the 17th November we will block the country!" The moment of digital gestation between the 12th and 16th of October 2018 was crucial: the petition received hundreds of thousands of signatures and the two principal Facebook groups which made up the virtual *agora* of the movement were created.[6] The element of the *commoning* of anger in virtual space served as a premise for the desire to meet physically, which happened somewhat later in the occupation of the roundabouts. Besides the three claims we mentioned previously, we must also note that another element was strongly debated: the refusal of the reduction of the speed limit from 90km per hour to 80km per hour on secondary roads. This measure, combined with the carbon tax, was considered a form of punitive discipline for the workers living in "peri-urban" areas.[7]

The *Gilets Jaunes* movement thus teaches us something about the concept of "technopolitics". Indeed, starting from 2001, we entered a properly technopolitical dimension of social movements, in which "the tactical and strategic use of technological apparatuses (including social media) for organisation, communication and collective action" (Toret 2015) overlaps with the appropriation of physical, digital and media space. We can say that technopolitics is present in

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[5] Link: https://www.change.org/p/pour-une-baisse-des-prix-à-la-pompe-essence-diesel

[6] The "France is angry!!!" group, created by Éric Drouet, had 340000 members, and the "France enraged" group, created by Maxime Nicolle, had 170000 members.

[7] In effect, those living in the Île-de-France were particularly affected by these two measures, since they spend on average 75 minutes per day in their vehicles, in contrast to the 45 minutes for inhabitants of rural areas (Béhar, Dang-vu, Delpirou 2018). Almost 70% of speed cameras were sabotaged in the first weeks of the mobilization.

the *Gilets Jaunes* movement because they engaged these three levels of space. However, unlike the "movement of the squares", including Occupy, Tahrir Square, the Spanish "indignadoes, and others, the appropriation of physical space by the *Gilets Jaunes* was double: on the one hand, there were the Saturday demonstrations in the city centres, where technopolitics functioned as a social machine for organization, counter-information and self-narrativizing; on the other hand, in the occupation of the roundabouts, it served the construction of direct democracy.

As regards the appropriation of media space, a real bifurcation occurred between social media and the mainstream press. First, because for several months, while official media were concealing police violence, live feeds on Facebook gave counter-reports and provoked a sentiment of collective indignation. Second, because technopolitics contributed to building a *leaderless* movement (Hardt and Negri 2017) despite the insistence of media on attributing it to charismatic leaders. On certain occasions, social networks did remove leaders chosen by the press, in a refusal of the figure of the "spokesperson". Nevertheless, certain moderators of the Facebook pages became "information relays" for the movement, mostly thanks to their transparent manner of communicating through networks. Even these latter were subjected to critical attention in Facebook groups, which confirms that technopolitical action was fundamental for the strategic choices of the movement, such as, for example, the rejection of representation, and the construction of horizonal practices (Cohen 2019).

However, it seems important to point out that technopolitics rests on an ambivalence: on one side, it contributes to the organizational capacity of a movement; on the other side, it is part of digital platforms characterized by the concentration of economic and political power and by the capture of social data for advertising or surveillance purposes (Vercellone et al 2018). Some analysts have observed that the modification of the Facebook algorithm which happened some months previously, aiming to promote posts made by "groups" rather than posts by "pages" (Le Pennec 2018), helped the rise of the *Gilets Jaunes*. At the same time, it is always the power and ownership structures of the platform which have allowed, on certain occasions, temporary censorship of counter-information pages ("*Cerveaux non disponibles*") or the pages of unions ("*Sud Rail*") which have a certain importance for the movement. In highlighting this ambivalence, we want to show here how digital space not simply served as an interface for the struggle of the *Gilets Jaunes* (which would be a deterministic approach to technopolitics), but quite on the contrary constituted one of its arenas of struggle.

Spatial explosion

Since the 17th of November 2018, the multitudinous character of the movement has been expressed on different levels. As is shown in the essays collected here, the movement was scattered across in the main suburban conglomerations of the country, as well as in certain rural areas. However, we would add that the *Gilets Jaunes* are not situated in a *given* location and that the material organization of space is for them an issue of political action. In this sense, one of the salient features of the movement, one of its multiple outcomes, is the *production of space* (Lefebvre 2000).

There are three *scalar* levels on which this "productive" character was expressed in the first weeks. First, the movement took a decentralized form, "a fractal and polytopic declension" (Gwiazdzinski 2019: 11): it occupied thousands of roundabouts, these "non-places" (Rancière 2019) of traffic regulation on roads. The second territorial level is its extension beyond "Metropolitan France". The "overseas" region of Reunion Island, where the rates of poverty are much higher than in metropolitan France, would precisely be the theatre of a popular insurrection which would last several weeks. Alongside this, groups of *Gilets Jaunes* appeared in neighbouring countries, even if these were not consolidated over time (in Belgium, as well as in Holland and Germany). Finally, the third spatial element concerns the "Acts" taking place on Saturdays, which were organised in the city centres of medium and big cities and which would give rise to riots and other urban forms of revolt. This would create a real political crisis within the government, and especially the executive branch. But what is even more interesting is that these "Acts" would extend over time and would become a sort of "urban custom" of the movement, where meetings between different figures working in the city would characterize moments of struggle.

But we should pause for a moment on the question of the roundabouts. Careful observation of the roundabout as "technology of struggle" (Jeanpierre 2019) proves certain readings made at the beginning of the movement wrong, which had received strong media attention, as in the case of the geographer Christophe Guilluy (2018). Guilluy claimed that the *Gilets Jaunes* were the embodiment of a non-society of "peripheral France", definitively separated from the social, productive and cultural fabric of the cities. Guilluy's project aimed to confine the *Gilets Jaunes* to a consuming and totalized concept of the "periphery" which would connect them to the "peripheral Great Britain" of Brexit and the "peripheral United States" who voted for Donald Trump.

However, following the crisis of the industrial city, the processes of urbanization of the last decades have challenged this distinction between "centre" and "periphery", urban and rural, city and country. As Éric Charmes shows, "the ancient opposition between cities and countryside continues to dominate our representations, even while it no longer corresponds to lived realities (...) So, the division between the France of the cities and peripheral France is frequently put down to a division between city and country, without the difference being perceived" (Charmes 2019: 101). The "peri-urban" is one of the spaces making up a very spread out metropolitan area, in which "a city radiates out over a vast territory" (Ibidem). Indeed, the essays collected here show us that far from being the peripheries versus the cities, the *Gilets Jaunes* opened a new socio-spatial configuration of struggles *within and against* the contemporary city, *within and against* its divisions, its segmentations.[8]

In this regard, the struggle of the *Gilets Jaunes* concerns the "common" in a double sense. On the one hand, it is a struggle against the dynamics of capitalist accumulation which, today, rest essentially on mechanisms of the extraction of socially-produced value and the dispossession of public goods (of the environment, of knowledge, of welfare). But at the same time, in the roundabout, the *Gilets Jaunes* create the common, which is to say, the assembly of different figures of living labour in the city - salaried, precarious, self-employed, intermittent, etc. The roundabout is thus a space which connects the *Gilets Jaunes* to each other and to the multiple territories of the

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[8] On "accumulation by dispossession" and the role of rental property in processes of urbanization, see David Harvey 2011.

city. Where it was impossible to wage a struggle for the "right to the city" - since the city, in its historical form, never existed - the form of the roundabout challenged the suburban residential environment thanks to a hybridization of the urban and the rural in networks of political cooperation.

These elements of the roundabout would be soon transferred into other parts of the city. Starting from mid-December 2018, the assemblies of the *Gilets Jaunes* would form in the main French cities - Toulouse, Bordeaux, Montpellier, Marseille, Nantes, Rennes, etc. - and in the many districts of Paris. To take up an expression of Marx's referring to the Paris Commune, the roundabout was, in an unmetaphorical sense, between November 2018 and January 2019, "the political form at last discovered" by the movement.[9]

Temporal persistence

A year and three months after their appearance, the *Gilets Jaunes* continue to surprise. They have proven wrong all those analysts who had decreed the "exhaustion" or the "ebb" of the movement, reappearing always in unexpected ways.[10] After December 2018, the government had reacted using three strategies. First, with economic concessions, which were judged insufficient and in some way deceptive by the *Gilets Jaunes*[11] and which in addition were not accompanied by any transformation of the political system, with respect to a movement that demanded, among other things, the creation of a Citizen Initiative Referendum (which is to say a direct legislative power entrusted to citizens). Rather than taking this request into account, Macron organized a "Great National Debate", with the intention of dividing the *Gilets Jaunes*, and of integrating a part (the "good" ones, as opposed to the "bad" ones) into the circuits of spectacular presidential politics. This operation failed because the movement refused to take part in the debate, on the one hand pursuing struggles, and on the other hand organizing alternative debates.[12] Lastly, the government reacted with violent repression, making the "democratic" and "participatory" rhetoric of the Great Debate an additional feature of power's dissociation from society.

After the spatial explosion, the *Gilets Jaunes* also showed a *temporal* side: the time of duration and persistence. Beyond the "Acts" and the weekly initiatives of the movement, the "yellow vest trend" now touches other processes of political subjectivation in society. In this sense, the *Gilets Jaunes* have become "producers of struggle" (Negri 2019) both in terms of the circulation of practices of struggle and of the encounter of new subjects of struggle. In December 2019, they contributed to making the opposition to the pension reform the largest general strike in Europe for decades. Even if the consequences of this strike movement are still uncertain, we can note that there exist two formulae which effectively express the influence of the *Gilets Jaunes* in this process: first, there was a "yellow-vestization of the strike", that is, the strikers adopted the

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[9] Marx (1940) p. 60.

[10] At the moment of our writing, we are in "Act 68".

[11] A good part of the 17 billion euros of the budget for the re-evaluation of the minimum wage was used in fact for a "business bonus" abolishing the need to pay social security costs for family allowance funds for employees - a complementary bonus so that the minimum wage would not be calculated considering the pension funds of future retirees.

[12] See the site of the platform "True Debate": https://www.le-vrai-debat.fr

Gilet Jaunes repertoire of practices including blocking traffic by transport workers - which is echoed in the occupation of the roundabouts - as well as the actions in train stations or malls which took place throughout the country during the strike. The second, the slogan "the strike belongs to the strikers" shows how, in the movement, there was an immanent critique of the traditional forms of union negotiation, such that practices of direct democracy and collective decision-making were reactivated, which were at the heart of the roundabouts and the Gilets Jaunes "Assembly of Assemblies". Thus, the movement that has been described for over a year as being a movement expressing a segment of class composition on the margins of the processes of production and reproduction of the city, has now become, on the contrary, the catalyst for new struggles for the re-appropriation of a social wage (Negri 2018) and welfare services across hospitals, schools, universities, cultural institutions, etc.

How is it that the *Gilets Jaunes* managed not only to resist but also to persist during all this time? The contributions assembled in this section of SAQ attempt to respond to this question, showing us a protean movement in constant transformation. They do so by developing three fronts of analysis. First, situating the event of the *Gilets Jaunes* in the discontinuous continuity of the history of struggles for emancipation in France. Then, showing the relation between the social composition of the movement, the political conjuncture and the forms of struggle, organized as a counter-power. Last, showing how the Gilets Jaunes managed to reimagine anti-capitalist struggle, making it indissociable from the ecological question. They provide fundamental elements for reflection and research on the international debate surrounding social movements.

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