

# Fieldwork in a roundabout

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**Pierre Blavier's ethnographic study of the roundabouts occupied by the Yellow Vest protestors sheds light on this movement's emergence and staying power. The sense that their way of life is directly threatened is key to understanding the Yellow Vests.**

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Reviewed: Pierre Blavier, *Gilets jaunes, la révolte des budgets contraints* (Yellow Vests: The Revolt of Constrained Budgets), Puf 2021, 240 p., 18 €.

On November 17, 2018, the Yellow Vests movement burst onto the stage, impressing public opinion with its novelty. Initially triggered by opposition to a reform of gasoline taxes, it rallied, throughout France and over a nearly two-year period, hundreds of thousands of people, belonging primarily to the working classes, independent of any militant organization.<sup>1</sup> This volatile movement, which called into question many assumptions of political scientists, seemed to render all totalizing theories fruitless.

By confining his ethnographic study of the occupation of roundabouts to a medium-sized town in central France during the movement's first two months, Pierre Blavier shows a subtle grasp of the many issues that are unique to this movement. Daily participant observation shows how the movement came together, in its physical and geographic contexts, notably in a region characterized by its rural setting, economic difficulties, an aging, working-class population, and a decline in public services. At the same time, Blavier manages to de-territorialize his explanatory

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<sup>1</sup> Collectif d'enquête sur les Gilets jaunes, "Enquêter in situ par questionnaire sur une mobilisation. Une étude sur les gilets jaunes," *Revue française de science politique*, vol. 69, n°5-6, 2019, p. 869-892.

framework by drawing on numerous studies of other parts of France to put his own findings in perspective.

Taking into consideration the relationship between life circumstances and political mobilization, Blavier shows how individuals endowed with different social properties were able to demonstrate side-by-side at roundabouts and how knowledge tied to forms of life were reinvested into the movement. The book, reflecting the inductive approach it employs, is organized into two parts. The first examines the mobilization that occurred at the roundabouts, particularly its congruence with the socio-professional groups that participated in it. The second is based on an objective and comprehensive study of the life circumstances of a family of Yellow Vests that seeks to grasp the protests' deeper motivations. By connecting an analysis of the subjects' budgets with an examination of their perceptions of their budgetary situation, Blavier acknowledges the complexity of the movement's causes, which lie at the intersection of contemporary changes to peri-urban life, the labor market, and public policy.

## **Occupying roundabouts: A demanding form of action**

A detailed description of the physical occupation of a roundabout, particularly the installation of roadblocks, helps readers to set aside unjustified assumptions about this demanding form of action. "Blocking the economy" of a country by daily limiting circulation across its entire territory requires resources and know-how. Knowledge of the road network in the area one wants to paralyze is necessary to occupy the most strategic passing points, such as roads linking towns to major highways (p. 52). The safe management of roadblocks also requires competence in road security, notably an ability to organize traffic passing through the roundabout while protecting oneself with road equipment. The movement, moreover, must be constantly legitimated, requiring the Yellow Vests to adapt their discourse and behavior to the drivers they stop. The desire to avoid undermining the movement in the eyes of the public and security forces led demonstrators to engage in collective reflections and self-control (p. 58). Remaining in the locations without amenities that are the roundabouts is also a logistical undertaking, as evidenced in the building of rest areas providing shelter from cold weather and opportunities to refresh oneself. These shelters were made from recycled materials provided by the Yellow Vests themselves or by drivers who

supported the movement. The latter may also contribute food and monetary donations (p. 64).

Occupying a roundabout thus requires practical knowledge and competencies that necessarily precede the mobilization itself. Blavier shows that the Yellow Vests' activist practices are consistent with earlier mobilizations relating to driving regulations, such as demonstrations against an ecotax in 2013 and [protests against an 80 kilometer-an-hour speed limit](#) in 2018. Moreover, parallel movements, like [retirees' opposition to the CSG](#) (a tax funding social benefits) and [protests in the health-care sector](#) "provided precedents that proved decisive in terms of fostering mobilizable networks and feelings of legitimacy and drawing on practical experience" (p. 126). In contrast to explanations that emphasize the movement's spontaneous character, Blavier presents the occupation of the roundabouts as the "receptacle of a range of [activist] knowledge," which also aligns with the "socio-professional milieus" (p. 127) that joined it. A sociography of the movement makes it possible to identify the causes and conditions of possibility of this mobilization.

## **A working-class movement?**

By comparing the results of his field research with data from other studies at the national level, Blavier grasps the specificities and common denominators of the participating groups. This leads him to qualify the use of all-encompassing concepts, like "working-classes," by demonstrating the overrepresentation of socio-professional categories that are tied to "car-based populations": in the case of men, skilled and unskilled workers in industry; in the case of women, health and home-care professions; and in the case of both sexes, drivers of various kinds (p. 36). This method also leads him to question the efficacy of various hypotheses that attempt to define the movement's social composition, namely: the claim that the Yellow Vest belong to "petty middling classes" (proposed by Marie Cartier *et al.* [2008]); their association with the anxiety of intermediary professions faced with technological change (analyzed by Bruno Palier [2019]); and the thesis of an "antibourgeois bloc" (defended by Bruno Amable [2018]).

The question of the intensive use of roads, which recurs throughout the book, helps to explain why people of such seemingly different backgrounds were able to mobilize outside of any institutional structure. As the *sine qua non* of the way of life

found on the periphery of urban centers, where low real estate facilitates access to home ownership, individual cars are often the only way to get to work and access services. The shared experience of car dependency makes apparent the movement's inner mechanisms: the initial outrage, the actions pursued, and its enduring character, despite its participants' heterogeneous backgrounds. A tax hike on gas was thus perceived as a direct attack (or "hostage taking") by this segment of the working classes, particularly at a time in which public services are becoming few and far between and employment opportunities were clustering around urban areas, lengthening commute times (p. 206-207).

The occupation of roundabouts appears to be a movement deeply rooted in the shared experiences of a peri-urban way of life. Many shared reference points (favorite music and comedians, sports fandom), most of which belong to "popular culture" (p. 81), function as unconscious frameworks for action. The result is a form of conviviality that, in addition to its logistical dimensions, constitutes one of the conditions of possibility of the durability of these occupations, where political discussions are avoided.

This sociography of the Yellow Vests accounts for a situation that at first blush would seem paradoxical, since, despite their underprivileged standard of living in relation to national levels (p. 66), they are not sectors that finds itself in the most precarious economic situation and the gas tax had only a limited effect on prices. Similar gas prices were reached in 2008 and 2012 (p. 14) without triggering protest. The interest of the book's analysis is that it turns away from mechanical explanations--the view that the movement was primarily a tax revolt--in favor of a broader approach, which seeks to understand why this segment of the working classes believes so strongly that it is the victim of fiscal injustice (p. 171).

## **Economic constraints and polarization**

Blavier is interested in the subjective experience of Yellow Vest families compared to their budgetary wiggle-room. To this end, he has devised a method inspired by ethno-accounting, which consists in interviewing family members at a roundabout to "determine" all the income and expenses "on which [their] budget is concretely based" and to assess them from the standpoint of the perceptions and representations they engender within these households (p. 141). This detailed

description shows that some of the economic difficulties faced by these groups are experienced subjectively as resulting from government policy, which leads to an attitude of defiance toward the state.

The compression of living standards in Yellow Vest households is the joint result of rising costs and the decline or stagnation of work income in peri-urban environments (p. 163). The professional trajectories of this demographic group are characterized by uncertainty (such as alternating periods of work and unemployment and the proliferation of contingent contracts) and physical strain (with difficult schedules and demanding physical effort) in a context in which salaries are dwindling and collective action is limited (p. 154). Consequently, income prospects are in decline and becoming increasingly uncertain. Furthermore, the number of "committed expenses" is on the rise due to an increase in energy taxes (fuel, electricity, gas), goods such as tobacco, and contracted expenses (insurance, phone, and internet contracts) (p. 164). To these must be added taxes that are experienced as "fiscal bludgeoning," resulting from their unprogressive nature and the fact that they hit this social class particularly hard (p. 171). The sense of being a victim of fiscal injustice, which drives their political activism, has more to do, according to Blavier, with government policies that seek to (dis)incentivize--that is, to change certain behaviors by making them costly. This is the case, for instance, with tobacco and the individual use of cars. Economic sanctions against such behavior have cumulative effects, which can be particularly onerous for the working classes (p. 174). These political measures also weigh heavily on car budgets--cars being the form of transportation that the Yellow Vests feel compelled to use--notably those relating to road security and CO2 emissions.

Faced with these "budgetary tensions," households seek to limit their expenses, notably by purchasing used goods, while trying to increase their income, whether through real estate and productive investments or through their own resourcefulness. The latter can include practices that lower costs, such as redesigning one's home, or increase one's income, such as selling metal (pp. 188-189). Yet these activities consume physical energy as well as time. Increasingly, they are also illegal, due to ever more restrictive legislation relating to real estate and machinery (p. 194). This knowledge can be seen as a form of everyday sub-political resistance, which is then converted into a repertory of militant actions when roundabouts are occupied. Finally, the array of Yellow Vest household budgetary practices helps to politicize them through an emphasis on fiscal injustice, for they have subjectively experienced an objective uptick in restrictive public policies (p. 207).

The book sheds light on the conditions of possibility for the emergency of movements like the Yellow Vests. In this way, it achieves the goals it set for itself. Even so, the first-hand empirical material on which the second chapter is based raises questions. It is a shame that only the male members of a family of demonstrators are interviewed, and that only short quotes, rather than longer excerpts, are provided. Even if second-hand statistical data control and systematize the authors' interpretations, additional interviews, whether of different families or within the same family, would have made it possible to identify other budgetary strategies and issues connected to other social attributes. Some budget details, such as annual trips to Portugal, are particular to the family interviewed by the author, whose members are Portuguese immigrants. Moreover, the section dealing with resourcefulness is approached from an exclusively male standpoint, even though government regulations can impact activities deemed feminine. One would have liked the book to engage with political sociology and the sociology of rural populations, particularly when it addresses practices of engaging in networks of interconnectedness and sociability (p. 189) or the relationship between movements and their territorial surroundings (p. 74). The use of studies employing an ecological approach to voting in peri-urban milieus, such as the work of Volaine Girard (2017), or concepts such as autochthony capital, coined by Nicolas Renahy (2005), would have helped to identify more precisely the relationship between the movement and territorial characteristics. These few regrets notwithstanding, the book can only be recommended, for it sheds unprecedented light on the Yellow Vest movement by bringing together the subjective and objective dimensions of economic constraint that afflicts a segment of the working classes.

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