From Facebook to traffic circles:
The Yellow Vests from virtual to real —
the territorial roots of a movement born on line

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Abstract:
Digital technology is the spearhead of a globalized economy. The political question of its regulation by nation-states necessarily involves local authorities and the power of democracy (by nature, local). This new public space is closely linked to the "first kilometer" of its life cycle: whoever consumes it produces it or, at least, its essence: information. It is realized "phygitally": at the physical, geographical point where millions of emitters create a miracle: either instantaneous knowledge or else an inferno of ubiquitous, "infobese" exchanges. This *pharmakon* becomes good or bad not following moral rules but depending on its volume and weight in the real life of a neighborhood or town. Made concrete via home-delivered products or metabolized into proxy voting for a delegation of local power, it either confines us within a space of control or else frees our collective creativity. Between 17 November 2018 and 8 April 2019, a democratic phenomenon at the juncture of the real and virtual realms broke out in France: the "Yellow Vest movement" present on social networks and at traffic circles, and soon followed by the Great Debate, a catalyst for individual voices made collective via online platforms. The desire for democracy was expressed thanks to the local (digital) capacity for transmitting millions of semantic data calculated by computers that quickly made them viewable by everyone — a year that could have experienced the awesome impact of thousands of coordinated social transformations in localities. This momentaneous freedom of speech, the written and recorded words of citizens, set off a headlong rush of national power-holders dizzy with this moment of democracy, while frustrating local authorities who were deprived of the responses to be given to active, productive citizens.

The history of digital technology's impact on democracy is being written day after day, simultaneously on different scales. French regulatory authorities are trying to come up with sturdy rules for sustaining the values of the Republic despite the commercial pressure exerted by "data industrialists". Concrete social demands have been voiced for: a tax on GAFAM (Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple, Microsoft), a "social price" for Internet services or the recognition of the employee status of self-employed workers on platforms like Uber.[1]

The digital industry's globalization raises environmental and human issues that have been, as activists from all sides claim, ranked second to financial profitability. The global "digital transition" is presented as inevitable by governments that see themselves at the head of "start-up nations", as winners in the competition between "smart cities" that is now taking place from the Far East to the West.

At their level of competence, local authorities in France have to change public space so as to build a high tech infrastructure, by laying cables and erecting antennas that will be rented to them — a point that does not delight mayors, especially in rural areas. As a consequence, the digitization of state services has put pressure on municipalities even as what used to be nearby public services are being "dematerialized". The procurement contracts that have been signed contain technical

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[1] This article, including quotations from French sources, has been translated from French by Noal Mellott (Omaha Beach, France). The translation into English has, with the editor's approval, completed a few bibliographical references. All websites were consulted in January 2021.

conditions and clauses that are not very clear about new services. Regardless of what they think, municipalities are contributing to a centralizing privatization dictated by EU regulations, like the directives on competition in information and communications technology (ICT) and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

Those who produce and maintain all this digital machinery have grabbed their share of power through the production, acquisition, management and circulation of data — an ocean of information that is warping the planet as much as the human species' behavioral and cognitive habitus. Deep changes are taking place as never before in the history of humanity.

Through a generalized appropriation of digital applications, platforms and equipment, citizens as users of digital services (private and public) can understand and sometimes condemn the ideological and commercial manipulations that target them, often with full impunity. Local democracy offers means of action; and citizens might sometimes benefit from the instantaneousness and discursion of all this information with its potential for facts, disinformation and propaganda. We observe ephemeral, popular movements for censoring hyped topics (fundamental or artificial). We observe a crisis management that is causing anxiety, even panic, even among elected officials in situations where self-control is needed and tempers should not be lost.

Over the past few years in France, "digital tools" have had a special place as a driving force in democracy. They have fostered "active citizenship".

What stands out in this context of transparency and information-sharing are the many sources of economic and social inequality, some of them longstanding, which the speed of the financialization of the new economy has often amplified. The multitude, too, is armed since it is the end user, the customer, of digital technology's power for exchanging experiences (HARDT & NEGRI 2004). Situations, individual and collective, have been deemed unacceptable and exposed. From being personal, the trauma has become collective. The power of the facts and images woven into online narratives lends the weight of words and the shock of photographs, which lie within everyone's reach, in every household, neighborhood, village and school.

Starting on Saturday, 17 November 2018, some people, outraged by what this new lucidity has let be seen and heard, demonstrated on traffic roundabouts in France to express their rawest feelings about being "fed up with taxes".[2] This nationwide movement is the first one known to have simultaneously sprung up in so many places, the small cities, towns and villages where inhabitants rebelled against the announced lowering of the speed limit on country roads, not to mention a new hike in the price of gasoline. The Internet proved what it has been from the start, namely an awesome network for popular mobilization and free speech.

A decentralized coordination of the movement was set up but without any national leader and, what was worse (or better), without interventions from political parties or labor unions (COLIN & VERDIER 2015). This movement took roots, through capillary action, in hundreds of localities in departments throughout the country, including those overseas. Mobilization was ubiquitous. Voices were simultaneously heard from one end of the country to the other. An idea that emerged in one place was then worked out and formulated in another. This asynchronous movement was active at any time of day or night, depending on work and family schedules. Demands were made, and arguments made for them, that would encompass all themes related to the feeling of having been abandoned by public authorities.

A population that had been silent in the usual "participatory" organizations (neighborhood committees, councils, etc.) seized on digital multimedia (within the reach of a mobile phone) to voice its difficulties. Hidden experiences, a source of shame for individuals or families, were recounted on these media in a sort of "coming out" that expressed the social emergency in rural and periurban zones. Thanks to the megaphone of blogs and webpages on the social networks, the narratives exchanged about social hardships revealed to what point a large number of families had

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[2] From https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mouvement_des_Gilets_jaunes:
"*The weight of withholding taxes (income, social security and other taxes) has increased nearly continuously since the 2008 meltdown, from 41% of the GDP in 2009 to more than 45% in 2017. This increase is mainly felt by the middle classes. […] The newspaper* Le Monde *has described the stagnation of the standard of living for ten years now and the increase in inequality since twenty years ago.*"

experienced them. There was talk about an "awakening of citizens", as women (in numbers) and men who had been politically passive became active on line, while a dozen leaders gradually emerged verbose. These demonstrators initially expressed themselves from their homes or places of work, very often on their mobile phones, and, later, outdoors in public where they filmed themselves for a viral dissemination on line that would rival the audience of TV news shows. They spoke to journalists, initially local ones who discovered the roots of an insurrection they had not seen coming. Their narratives made headlines on the social media, reporting on a France that was more "fractured" than any analyst had realized.[3] The roundabouts became public forums, a solid ground for debating outdoors in public, discussions that were then echoed on hundreds of webpages, websites and social network accounts. One demand that emerged was for a "citizens' initiative referendum", democracy on sufferance.

The dimension of this "social web" was still not very visible when, in December 2018, the government accepted to make a gesture toward this democracy on the move by proposing, not a referendum, but a Great Debate nationwide. Observers did not expect massive participation. High state officials imagined that, by freeing speech, an insurrectional movement could be curbed that was destabilizing national politics and staining the country's international reputation. The demand for democratic actions by the Yellow Vest movement thus received a response that would involve hundreds of thousands of people who were ready to make proposals that would be of use to the underprivileged, and often to everyone.

Meanwhile, the government's plans for using digital technology were well advanced. Officially endorsing the idea of a "start-up nation", they focused on high connection speeds and the total dematerialization of public services. Placing digital technology at the center of democracy was seen as a strong action, a signal of modernity, that would conveniently rally "civic tech" startups. The key to the Great Debate would be a website where participants could make their views. The software for this website was already being used in several ministries. The technical solution that was adopted allowed for separating the debate into themes, thus making it easer to voice support for, or opposition to, any given theme, while allowing identified participants to make comments with a multiplier effect on each proposal made.

An association (AMRF) of elected officials — to which mayors from rural areas belonged — actively organized a manual collection of grievances recorded on paper. The famous *cahiers de doléances* of the French Revolution were open, one again, in the countryside and in neighborhoods. The President's Office could not be blamed for proposing an online solution even though it would inevitably exclude many participants, because of the well-known digital illiteracy against which successive undersecretaries of Digital Technology had inveighed. The theme of a digital divide would crop up repeatedly among these grievances.

This wave of posts and grievances swelled a debate that took place during what professionals considered to be a very short time: three months, from 14 December 2018 till 18 March 2019. All this came as a total surprise. More than a million people wrote a sentence or a few dozen pages as their contribution, anonymous or identified. An estimated more than five million contributions were received, whether on line or on paper, including more than 500 motions from national associations, not to mention the thousands of local meetings where proposals were drafted. The statistics, still available on the official website, indicate 10,134 local meetings for 16,337 *cahiers* collected by communes and 27,374 messages, by mail or e-mail received directly at the President's or Prime Minister's offices. In addition, more than 381,346 persons made 1,932,884 posts on the official website. During this period, an estimated 2000 unofficial sites, pages and accounts on the Internet and on social networks were also devoted to this debate. Some critics have tried to cast doubt on these statistics in order to minimize the need of recognition of people who had, at last, become full-fledged citizens.

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[3] Like the geographer Christophe Guilly (2014) who has described a "peripheral France". In a recent interview, he explained: "*The movement is but the symptom of a much broader populist reconfiguration that affects all Western democracies*" (DEVECCHIO 2019). He wondered whether this comeback would not be the major issue in the decades, or even century, to come.

The Great Debate commenced with a spectacular disagreement. The Commission Nationale du Débat Public, which conducts public hearings, had naturally been asked to head this debate, but it stood down. According to the CNDP's chair, the conditions for guaranteeing this procedure's independence, neutrality and impartiality were not satisfactory. Despite this discredit cast on plans for the Great Debate, international observers acknowledged the effectiveness of the arrangements for collecting opinions. A nationwide democratic procedure for participation of an unprecedented scope was thus managed thanks to ICT.

The organization of digital technology used for the Great Debate was entrusted to three firms already under contract with the state. They executed the short list of specifications set by the government but controlled by five trustees, who auditioned the firms thrice. With a budget estimated at €3 million, these firms designed the digital platform, produced and updated software and other digital tools, managed security, released some data and analyzed the multitude of contributions, all in a record time and under the conditions of a temporary service organized directly by the Prime Minister's Office. The officially announced budget of €12 million probably included expenditures on communication and for organizing local debates in the presence of the president and, too, the costs of local events organized by local authorities.

The Great Debate was, therefore, able to come up with a "social compromise" by drawing on all these contributions as analyzed by experts and academics. On Monday, 8 April 2019, many of them brought their conclusions to the Élysée Palace. The diversity of this collective intelligence finally materialized in concrete proposals, which were often realistic and could be rapidly applied. This was a wonderful, solid foundation for modernizing a society that had been, till then, fractured. Unfortunately, few editorials in national newspapers covered this day of qualitative feedback from the Great Debate. It was, however, broadcast on Public Sénat TV. No way of responding to this event could satisfy all these citizens, who had been motivated by what they saw as a historical opportunity for participation.

The government had initially formulated four questions. A summary of the answers to them can be found on the website (granddebat.fr) along with a few files of open data. Participants did not, however, restrict their participation to these four questions. They fully recounted their experiences and expressed their ideas on specific, crosscutting themes. They formulated political solutions that had already been applied in some communes but could be implemented more broadly. The government clearly summarized this with the words: an "*immense need for justice and fairness*".

This corpus is a political treasure chest. Let us hope that mayors — the group in whom the French have the most confidence — will realize the quintessence of this work done by their fellow-citizens. They might pay close attention to the conspectus of proposals on the theme of "democracy and citizenship", where support was unanimously voiced for: an official count of the number of blank ballots cast in elections, proportional representation, mandatory unanimous and local referendums. Mayors would thus be able to respond to the announced outbreak of a new Yellow Vest epidemic, against which the Great Debate could be a vaccine.

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