

Conflict beyond law and regulation

From the *Gilets Jaunes* uprising to the spontaneous strike wave
in Italy at the early stage of the pandemic

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I. The ‘Gilets jaunes’ uprising in France (2018-2019)

1. Facts & chronology
2. Common sensical and academic understandings
3. Critical assessment
4. Gilets Jaunes about work and income
5. Ecological issues
6. A movement with a mainly white background and traditionalist views
7. The experience of police brutality
8. Some conclusive reflections

II. The spontaneous strike wave in Italy at the early stage of the pandemic (March 2020)

1. Chronology
2. In the aftermath: closing the gap – divide and rule
3. What do trade union activists say about these events?
4. Similar actions took place elsewhere
5. Some broader elements of understanding
6. Life vs. Capital: elements for a sociological understanding
7. Some concluding remarks

III. Conflict, labour and the making of class

1. Centrality of labour during the pandemic
2. The global increase of paid and unpaid labour
3. Neoliberalism is ‘undoing the demos’
4. Strengths and weaknesses of disruptive mobilisations
5. Growing discontent is going global
6. Multitude or class?
7. Remaking the demos through to rebuilding class antagonism
8. The need to reformulate class analysis

I. Some facts and a brief chronology

- The *Gilets Jaunes revolt* started via social networks to protest against an important rise in fuel prices due to an ecological tax. It should also be remembered that the Macron government's decision to introduce this fuel tax was preceded by the decision to repeal the superrich tax.
- The revolt started in mid-November 2018 and lasted until April-May 2019. It had two sequences: the first one extended from mid-November 2018 until the end of January 2019; the second one from February 2019 until its gradual extenuation in May-June 2019.
- The first sequence is characterised by very intensive mobilisation each Saturday, which was presented as Act I, Act II, Act III. During the week, a large number of roundabouts were occupied and flying pickets actions were very regularly blocking motorway tolls.
- At the height of the movement in December 2018, there were nearly 3000 roundabout occupations. Saturday demonstrations could count up to 100,000 people (Paris) or 50,000 in some large provincial cities (Marseille, Toulouse, Rouen). Smaller towns with 10 or 25,000 inhabitants also saw demonstrations of 1000 to 2,000 people.



- At the beginning of December 2018, the government was frightened that worse could happen, because of warnings coming from the prefectures that it could get out of control while the employers expressed directly to Macron their fear in the face of a social rage they had never had seen before. There was something going on and nobody knew what would come next...
- In mid-December 2019, Macron decided to back down on the fuel tax. A concession on purchasing power was also made (with a general increase of 150 euros paid by employers but subsidised by the government).

- At the same time, the government decided to launch a 'great national consultation' which lasted until the end of April 2019 and which was supposed to allow the participants in the mobilisation to express their demands and wishes. The government thus responded to the massive revolt by combining concessions and 'openness' to debate while maintaining a very repressive and brutal policing policy.



- This was especially evident during the second sequence, and resulted in more than 20,000 injuries, of which nearly 100 were injured, 25 people were blinded, a dozen people had their hands torn off and one person died after being shot by a grenade. The police brutality involved trenching the processions, using ‘netting’ and confining demonstrators to a limited perimeter, and then firing teargas grenades and baton charges.
- According to several human rights organisations such as Amnesty, the Council of Europe, the policing techniques were an abuse of force (asymmetric response) and used inappropriate weapons, similar to low intensity warfare, as used by the Israeli army against Palestinian demonstrators.



For a critical and comprehensive account of the riots during the upsurge, see Gallo Lassere & Lavergne (2022)

2. Common sense and academic understandings

1. Mass media never offered a stable framing or understanding (of course)

With many ‘common sensical’ narratives as consequence...

2. Trade unions remained on the side line. First because they saw it as reactionary. Second because they were rejected by the Gilets jaunes as attempting to recuperate (still many CGT and Solidaires activists were among the Gilets jaunes.).

3. The left was very critical. Radical left was sceptical at the beginning but came in later on. On the other hand, the autonomist-anarchist ‘cloud’ (Comité Invisible), participated from the beginning, wiped fascists out of demo’s and gained respect by their assertive confrontation with police.

4. At the academic level, the Gilets jaunes movement was presented in various ways

- ‘A postmodern ‘Jacquerie’ against the elite’ (referring to the peasant upheavals in France during 14th century).
- ‘A populist tax revolt with an anti-ecological orientation’
- ‘A popular revolt of peripheral semi-urban France (Bruno Latour)’
- ‘A transclassist revolt against neoliberalism and political deafness of the elite’
- ‘A popular revolt of the ordinary people motivated by a common sensical critique of injustice’

3. Critical assessment

Many ethnographic accounts deliver useful insights about the importance of solidarity, fraternity, and the role of mobilisation in the formation of a strong common identity. Still, most of these inquiries left aside the issue of class and its subterranean dynamics. In order to make my point, I will share some of the results of a large survey conducted in January 2019 with 4000 respondents (1).

- 46% of respondents called themselves ***Gilets jaunes*** at the moment of the survey and about 70% of them declared supporting the protest during this early stage. A very large support!
- 22% of the respondents have had some involvement (at least online, occupying roundabouts or going to Saturday demo's); but 10% participated to two or more of these actions;
- Among those strongly involved, low wage employees and self employed are the vast majority (80%)
- Among those who engaged into actions, the majority was younger than 40. Among those who supported the movement, elder male form a majority.
- 75% among those claiming to be GJ (active or support) say that their living standard has fallen over the last 5 years.
- 75% of active GJ face budget constraints on a regular (48%) or permanent (24%) basis.
- 56% of those who support GJ are in the same situation (resp. 40% and 16%)
- Among those actively involved (at least 3 types of action), the rate rises to 80% (50% regular and 30% permanent).
- The vast majority of GJ are either tenants (40%) or indebted owners (50%).
- The involved Gilets jaunes consider that their personal life is under strain because of the lack of health services and public services. Nearly 60% of GJ (active & support) would like to live elsewhere, to change their place of living.
- Three out of five French people use a car on a daily basis. This degree of use is slightly more frequent among the Gilets jaunes but it is not a discriminating factor.

4. Gilets Jaunes views about work and income

- Individuals claiming to be GJs generally had higher levels of restriction than the rest of the population (holidays, going out, clothing, food, heating and personal care).
- The lesser one experience restriction, the more s/he tend to be against the movement. At the same time, unactive GJ show higher degree of restriction.
- The GJs are distinguished by a particularly widespread feeling of not being paid for their commitment and skills: 71% had the feeling they were not fairly paid regarding their commitment and skills; 58% consider their work is not recognised properly ; and 55% do not trust their employer (private/public)
- The more respondents were opposed to the GJ movement, the more their job satisfaction increase!
- ‘What should company's profits be used for at first?’
 - => 60% consider profits should be used first and foremost to increase employees' pay,
 - => 20 % to consolidate investments;
 - => 12 % to increase income of both management and workers.

5. Ecological issues are considered as real and important

Are you worried by ecological and environmental issues such as climate and biodiversity?

- All respondents => Not at all 3% // Not very much 17% // **Quite worried 57%** // **Very much 23%**
- GJ (active) => Not at all 3% // Not very much 16% // **Quite worried 57%** // **Very much 24%**
- GJ (supporters) => Not at all 3% // Not very much 18% // **Quite worried 59%** // **Very much 20%**

Do you integrate ecological issues into your way of consumption?

- GJ (actively involved) => Almost not 8% // Poorly 32% // **Importantly 48%** // **Very importantly 12%**
- GJ supporters => Almost not 8% // Poorly 32% // **Importantly 50%** // **Very importantly 10%**
- Opponents of GJ => Almost not 9% // Poorly 28% // **Importantly 52%** // **Very importantly 10%**

We can observe that ecological awareness is present, but not significantly differently than for whole sample of survey.

During the demonstrations, some activists held the banner « end of the month / end of the world = same issue same fight » as an attempt to articulate struggle against impoverishment and against climate crisis.

6. Still a movement with mainly white background and a strong adherence to traditionalist views

The vast majority of Saturday demonstrators were white. Road blocks and occupations of roundabouts did mobilise a more diverse public but not significantly.

Among the GJ respondents (active and supporting the movement)

- 20% identify themselves with the political right wing (among them 10% extreme right)
- 57% are afraid that globalisation is altering French identity
- 52% do regret that traditional values are neglected in France
- 53% disagree with the idea that cultural diversity and migration is a benefit for France
- 48% consider that people have the benefit of rights but not enough obligations
- But, at the same time, the encounters at roundabouts between working poor and those entitled to unemployment benefits created new networks of solidarity and shared views, much against the view of unemployed people as lazy.
- In-depth ethnographic studies showed that among the layer that remained active till March April 2019, many changed their world views and became much more open to progressive ideas. See Bouquin (2019) ; Clément (2020)
- as well as <https://reporterre.net/Gilets-jaunes-en-Lorraine-les-braseros-chauffent-toujours-a-la-colere-sociale>

7. The experience of police brutality leads to solidarity

During the second phase of the movement (less an upsurge and more a radical protest movement), police brutality was getting harder. Violent clashes occurred every Saturday demo's, certainly in main cities.

Black block networks intervened and hit back at several occasions. They also shared their skills to protect the demonstrators from police raids upon groups of demonstrators.

This experience may have had a certain effect upon consciousness radicalising Gilets jaunes understanding better what state violence and police repression means, specially for coloured youth.

"If you come across young or not so young people from the underprivileged suburbs, you can tell them from me that if there's one thing this movement has taught me, it's to completely reconsider the way I used to look at this 'scum' and its supposed violence. I've had a month and a half of being beaten up once a week (by the police) and I'm already at the end of my rope, so I can't even imagine the anger they might have inside them to suffer what they suffer or say they suffer. In short, I think it's the first time I feel close to them and I tell myself almost every day that I've been very stupid, with my average privileged white man's eyes." (a yellow waistcoat), quoted in M. Lazzarato (2019 : 42)

"We've been yellow waistcoats since the cradle". (A young man of Moroccan origin)

The Gilet jaunes revolt can be seen as echoing the youth revolt of the suburbs in 2005 which lasted also several months and faced huge repression. It lead some postcolonial activists to call for an alliance between "beaufs and barbares", i.e an alliance between white and racialised/colonised proletarians. (see Bouteldja, 2018)

8. Some conclusive remarks about the GJ revolt (I)

1). It was a spontaneous social uprising, an unexpected event that lasted for 6 months before it gradually fading out. It was at the same time an uprising and a social movement

- against poverty of the wage-earners,
- against the ‘proletarization’ of middle strata (fractions of the petty bourgeoisie, self employed and small entrepreneurs)
- and a movement for ‘real democracy’ at the service of ‘the people’

2). The GJ uprising reflected

- The weaknesses of the trade unions both inside firms as on the level of society and the dysfunctional collective bargaining ;
- An attempt to overcome the inability to achieve social improvement (income and living conditions) against organised social regression of neoliberal policies.
- The expectation that Macron should be open to demands and less technocratic

3). This uprising was not transclassist nor simply ‘popular’ but a **revolt of the labouring classes** with a plebeian self-consciousness. Still, the views about the movement were mixed ; the participants saw themselves as ordinary French people that need better life, higher income, a fair distribution of wealth, but also as the ‘real country’ against the elites, etc.

4). However, a populist framing following the approach of Laclau and Mouffe tend to hide the class dynamics that are reflected in socio-economic characteristics as well as in the demands that were most strongly advocated.

5). But the absence of a platform and assumed self organisation with democratic elected leaders retained the movement to follow a certain path towards a better understanding of itself. The only attempt to organise the movement came from a local comitee (Commercy) that called for national gatherings that took place three times. But their orientation was more towards renewal of democracy, municipalism (influenced by Murray Bookchin)

The GJ movement bears the characteristics of our times (ideological confusion, blurring of the left-right divide) and stigma of the past (distrust of the left, accumulated since deceiving policies of Mitterrand, Jospin, Hollande).

6). It was a founding conflict that marked French political climate in a prolonged way. It appeared after the defeated strike movement against the El Khomry law or Loi Travail. A revolt that also expressed the awareness about the impossibility of trade unions to defend working people. The uprising therefore also reflected a undefined identity on the subjective level. Still, only one year later, in September 2019, a large protest movement emerged against the pension reforms. Some commentators spoke (a little bit artificially) about the “gilet-jaunization” of trade union mobilizations.

7). The choice to avoid to express explicit and concrete demands (just like the Occupy Wall Street movement) facilitated a certain unity, but also hindered a clarification around political definition and a class based orientation. The government was able to play upon these differences and used the violence of the demonstrations as a scarecrow.

8). It was a conflict beyond law and regulation (as happened before) but also beyond embedded and parliamentary democracy (direct action, refusal to negotiate and to present interlocutors, recurrent demonstrations with a strong ‘spectacular’ dimension).

II. The spontaneous strike wave of in Italy at the early stage of the pandemic (March 2020)

'Non siamo carne da macello'

('we are not cannon fodder')



I. Facts and chronology of the strike wave (March 2020)

- Early February first cases appear in Northern Italy (21st of February first person died).
- End of February several cases are identified. On the 24th of February, Government Conti took the decision to quarantine some municipalities in province of Lodi and Codogno.
- At same time, in Bergamo, Covid-19 is spreading on a much larger scale.
- Still, the employers' organisation Cofindustria exerted pressure so that the sanitary measures did not reach the productive sphere. In Bergamo, an industrial district where equipment goods are manufactured and integrated into the globalized value chains, it was important that production did not stop. The clip 'Bergamo is running' (27/02) bears witness to this productivist orientation that has sacrificed public health on the altar of profit.



- On the 5th March, schools and universities were closed. On the 9th of March, a new decree extended ban on travel, cultural activities and sports events to the whole of Italy. The only way out of the house was to go to work. It was at this point that the inconsistency became unbearable: ‘So you have to keep working, even if you can't go out for a coffee...’
- 9th of February the strike wave started (Fiat Pomigliano). Up till 13th of March, the spontaneous strike wave is spreading, involving more than 150 factories, most ‘metalmeccanici’, with about 100 to 150 000 workers involved. The strike wave was on the front page of all daily papers. After two days of strikes, FIOM-CGIL changed its position from ‘keep on working as long as sanitary measures are taken’ to ‘yes to closure of non essential activities’ and called on the national CGIL to advocate that position. And indeed, CGIL leader Maurizio Landini threatened Conti with a general strike.
- Prime Minister Conti was obliged to give in and decided by decree to stop non-essential activities. On 17 March, Giuseppe Conti imposed by decree the complete shutdown of all economic activities ‘except what is essential to society’. However, the list of essential activities had not been decided and each company could therefore declare itself to be producing an essential activity, without any verification.

Coronavirus, tensione alle stelle in fabbrica: sciopero spontaneo alla Fca di Pomigliano

NAPOLI > CRONACA

Martedì 10 Marzo 2020 di Pino Neri



22,8 mila



L'azienda aveva proprio di recente annunciato una serie di disposizioni urgenti per fronteggiare il contagio da **Coronavirus** in fabbrica. Ma i lavoratori della Fiat di **Pomigliano** evidentemente non si sono sentiti soddisfatti da queste precauzioni organizzative. Stanno scioperando spontaneamente.

2. In the aftermath: closing the gap – divide and rule

- From the end of 2020 up to end of 2021, employers and government advocated a large campaign of vaccination as a way to restore confidence and to be able to put the economic activity as soon as possible back on track. This closed partially the gap between labour and the state as well as capital (employers).
- But on the shopfloor level, vaccination meant that measures of protection, sanitization, controlling contaminations and putting under quarantine had to be loosened. This maintained for CGIL shop stewards a state of awareness and commitment to pursue actions in favour of health and safety, as well as containing measures to put a brake on the spread of Covid-19.
- Contrary to France, there was no widespread opposition to vaccination. Still, a certain level of distrust was present, among the less conscious layers of the working class and middle strata of the population.
- The introduction of the Green pass as a coercive tool of biopolitical control (Foucault) was a source of division among workers. Acting against such coercive tool while being in favour of vaccination was a position that could barely find any audience. Far right / neofascist currents made several attempts to mobilise people against Green pass as well as against vaccination but they did not reached out very long although there was a violent raid against CGIL headquarters.

3. What do union activists say about these events?

Eliana Como (spokesperson for CGIL left) : "At the end of February 2020, Italy was in the news with the Corona coming from China. Faced with the growing panic, the Cofindustria (the employers' organisation) found nothing better than to produce a video entitled *Bergamo is running*, which means as much as 'don't worry, we'll continue whatever the cost'.... The Cofindustria was scrambling to reassure foreign customers and they are putting pressure on the authorities to ensure that Bergamo would not become another zona rossa. (...)

In Bergamo, there were 6,000 deaths in two months! This is a higher number than the number of civilians who died in the first and second world wars. There were thirty pages of obituaries a day in the local newspaper. The hospitals were full to burst, the doctors were sorting patients and at some point it was decided to desperately sick people to the elder people nursing homes, which caused a massacre there too. (...)

At that time, no one could say what Covid was, but in the hospital, all kinds of people ended up with an oxygen mask. Afterwards, those who died were the most fragile, that's true. But one wonders why while having the best hospitals of the world, we were not able to respond to urgent needs. We have the best private clinics but that too was not enough. We know why. The number of critical care beds has been continuously reduced since the beginning of the 2010s, due to the public finance crisis."

Domenico Loffredo, shop steward RSU FIOM-CGIL Fiat Pomigliano: “While the calls to stay home continued to be made in the media, our factory continued to produce cars as if nothing had happened. The strike started on 9 March, and I think it was, if not the first, certainly one of the first. All those who know FIAT in Pomigliano and who are interested in trade union issues know very well that it has been difficult to strike in recent years. But now it is spreading like wildfire.

The strike started in the assembly section, where there are the most people. About a hundred assembly line workers crossed their arms just before a meeting with the company's management. The strike, which was spontaneous in nature, was only supported by the IMF, which, on the workers' call, decided to 'cover' the initiative. (...)

The primary demand had nothing to do with the implementation of a national protocol agreement on distancing and protection measures, signed the same day. It was about demanding the cessation of production activities, given the non-essential value of the goods produced. The words that came up most often in the mouths of colleagues were "Non siamo carne da maccelo" (we are not cannon fodder). We had to protect our health and that of our family! The spread of the virus had to be stopped, so they had to stop working. It made no sense to continue making cars when everything was closing down, from schools to Fiat car dealers...".

In the case of UPS in Milan, the trade union was against a full strike since it was hard to maintain and also because some goods to be delivered could be essential. The CGIL adopted a tactic of slowing down activity, under workers control, with protection of all those workers who have elder people at home or relatives with health issues.

Antonio Forlano, shop steward CGIL-FILT UPS Milan another kind of situation

"The epidemic has become a global pandemic in just a few weeks, it is something that threatens you not only individually but socially. The disease is also spreading in a cultural context : unlike Asian countries, we have no tradition of wearing masks. As a result, as trade union, we had to adopt a very clear line of conduct: firstly, we are in a pandemic, we have to recognise this and inform the workers; secondly, we have to follow all sanitary health instructions, which is something management did not want us to do, as they were busy reducing the risks while continuing with production; thirdly, we have to establish direct communication with colleagues and equip ourselves with the main technological tools. Each delegate informs his sector in his company; he informs his colleagues and this information is centralized at the collective level; four, we must protect the most fragile; those who have health problems, who live with elderly parents. These people should not come to work. At the same time, those who do not have health problems and who do not jeopardise the health of their families should come to work.

For Mario Lavazzi (coordinator of CGIL left wing Giornate di Marzo), the ‘March days’ expressed the reawakening of a diffuse class consciousness : *“What was a driving force behind this awareness was the conflict of interests between capital and labour. Large sectors of workers became aware of the centrality of their work and of the government’s desire to give primacy to capital, to the entrepreneurial world, over the integrity of labour. The government had begun to close and regulate access to public space, but clearly, in their minds, the corporate world is something else. The wave of strikes has shifted the lines within the CGIL and the government has closed the breach that its inconsistency had opened.”*

For Gianplacido Ottaviano (shop steward FIOM CGIL Bonfiglioli) : *“In reality, what we experienced is not so new. In the Middle Ages, while the inhabitants of the cities were dying from the plague, the nobles and the bourgeoisie took refuge in the countryside in their fortified villas. Faced with the risk of the Covid, capital thought that it was enough to stay at home and be safe. This was the meaning of their decrees at the beginning of March, which mentioned nothing about work or the company. But society cannot function like in the Middle Ages. On the one hand, from the point of view of workers, taking shelter while continuing to work becomes a completely incongruous idea. On the other hand, society needs permanent activity so that people can feed themselves and basic needs are covered. This has been called the indispensable or essential activities.”*

4. Similar actions took place elsewhere

The strike wave in Italy was not an isolated fact. In other European countries similar actions took place.

- In Spain, the Mercedes automotive plant was closed after several stoppages followed by a full strike because management was not applying the decision to interrupt production. In this case, a strike was necessary in order to apply the law.
- In France, Renault wanted to restart its production at the Sandouville plant in Normandy at the end of April 2020. The local branch of the CGT introduced a court action because of insufficient risk assessment regarding contamination of Covid-19. The court's decision followed the demands of the CGT but after appealing to a higher court, management won its case. Other similar cases in May and June dismiss trade union demands to maintain restricted production.
- At Amazon France, trade unions did win a case regarding the restriction of delivery of non essential goods. Another similar case at Amazon considered that management did not consulted in a proper way the health and safety commission that has a right to intervene and impose work stoppage when one's health is in danger.
- In Brussels (Belgium) about 200 bus drivers have won a court case against the metropolitan public transportation company demanding to maintain severe sanitary restrictions (number of passengers, cleaning and a shield between them and the driver) after the end of the lockdown. The bus drivers used the individual 'right to retract' from work because of hazard. They were subjected to sanctions for refusal of work but resisted to this repressive response of management.

5. Some broader elements of understanding

Generally speaking, following De Genova (2021) it is necessary to acknowledge:

- “Like all ostensibly ‘natural’ disasters, the coronavirus pandemic unceasingly reveals the depths of social inequality and political myopia or governmental recklessness that predictably exacerbate the effects of a more strictly natural calamity. The pandemic thereby exposes the grotesque disparities in how illness, death, and suffering are unevenly distributed. As the COVID-19 public health crisis has summarily provoked a global economic crisis, furthermore, it is simply unthinkable to comprehend the real ramifications of the pandemic outside of the socio-political relations of labour and capital.”
- A common sense such as ‘Nothing happened’ could barely be spoken out. Therefore, the mainstream discourse was more like ‘Of course, people have emotional reactions because of fear’... Still, in the eyes of broad layers of the population, the government and employers faced a spontaneous strike wave that could have become much larger...
- With the benefit two years' hindsight, my inquiry among CGIL activists shows that these spontaneous strikes still have a historic significance, at least for a broad layer of trade union activists.

- The strike wave was fundamental in highlighting some lessons of great importance, namely that from the viewpoint of capital, living labour ('lebentige arbeit' as Marx says) only exists as a 'human capital', i.e. as a resource for profit. But that living labour power exists also thanks to its capacity to stop or slow down production and disrupt the cycle of accumulation of capital. Without living labour, capital is nothing. Labour should therefore always be considered as coming first regarding the antagonistic relation to capital. Labour is therefore always agency.
- The strike wave expressed, on the part of a significant sector of the working class, a will of self-determination. It has brought onto the political scene a protagonist who was making a decisive choice in favour of public health through his actions. It is a choice of self-defence; a choice in favour of life and against capital.
- Indeed, the employers took 'revenge' against the general lockdown a few months later, when they caused the fall of Conti's government (January 2021) and brought Mario Draghi into office. During 2nd, 3rd and subsequent waves of the pandemic, there was no general lockdown anymore stopping production (remote work and holding essential activities but as much as ordinary had to be carried out).

6. Life vs. Capital: elements for a sociological understanding

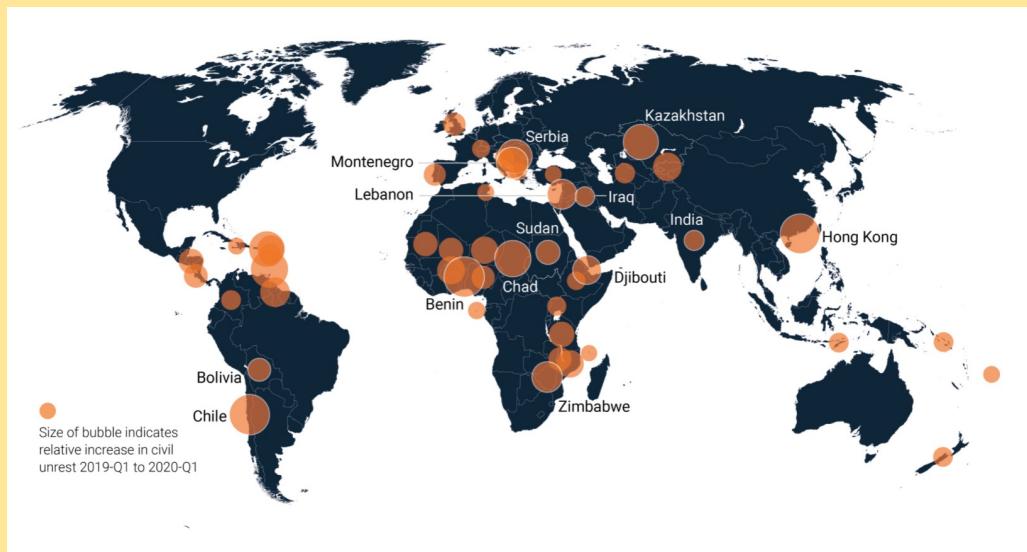
- On a more theoretical level, the antagonism between life and capital that is expressed by the strike wave confirms one of the fundamental analytical insights of Marx. As Nicola De Genova exposes quite clearly, the basic antagonism between labour and capital is already a struggle of life against death:
- *“The constitutive and irreconcilable antagonism of labour and capital is well known to be a central thesis of Karl Marx’s thought, but it is less well appreciated that the endemic struggle of labour against capital is, for Marx, fundamentally a struggle of life against death. From the standpoint of capital, everything is (at least potentially) capital, such that labour itself is reframed (and disfigured) as ‘human capital. (...)’”* (Di Genova, 2021 : 240).
- This hidden or forgotten fact came to the surface at the early stage of the pandemic and was clearly expressed on the political level by the opposing action of employers favouring capital and therefore death and by the opposition by human / living labour fighting for life against capital and a the threat of the pandemic.

- As Nicholas De Genova states in his essay ‘Life vs Capital’: “From the standpoint of labour, in contrast everything that enters into the scope of human social life is always already intrinsically socialized by purposeful human activity: labour. Hence, all of social life is either a manifestation of human productive powers and creative capacities, or the product thereof; it is either living labour, or the product of past labour (which Marx instructively depicts as ‘dead labour’). Capital, as an accumulation of the wealth produced by labour performed in the past, is therefore dead labour, which nonetheless can only sustain and replenish itself by constantly feeding upon the vitality of the living. Labour, consequently, is merely a particular form and specific expression of human life itself. The famous class struggle of labour against capital, then, is merely one manifestation of the endemic and irreconcilable struggle of capital, vampire-like, to cannibalize the creative energies of human life, and the struggle of human life against its objectification and alienation—our struggle, to preserve, protect, and promote our own flourishing. **By escalating the intrinsic antagonism of human life and capital, the COVID-19 pandemic exposes capital’s absolute and utter dependency upon human life-as-labour—which is to say, more precisely, capital’s constitutive requirements for the subjection of human life as subordinated (alienated) labour.”** (Di Genova, 2021 : 241)

7. Some concluding remarks

- In some exceptional moments such as (not so) natural disasters, war or a pandemic, people are disposable to enter into action, be it support, solidarity or a kind of self defence. This is nothing new as was demonstrated by Rebecca Solnit (2009).
- In times of disaster, recognising the permanence of structural antagonistic relations between labour and capital remains a key issue.
- At such moments, articulating class issues with societal ones is absolutely necessary. In this case it was public health, but in other situations, it can be provision of energy and unpolluted water, healthy food, an improved public school system, decent housing etc.
- The major difficulties lies around the inaction or disorientation of labour movement and trade unions: being in favour of vaccination or not; in favour or against green pass; in favour of good public health services but without having the leverage to impose this since there is neither a broad center-left party neither a radical left party with some mass influence. Demoralisation, defeat and confusion can deliver the far right and neofascism a mass audience to advocate solidaristic authoritarian ‘solutions’.

III. The centrality of labour, conflict and the remaking of class in times of growing inequality and disaster



I. Centrality of labour during the pandemic

Defending (working) life against capitals endless voracity was also at the core of the spontaneous strike wave in Italy, as well as it happened also on a more fragmented and isolated level elsewhere.

The pandemic demonstrated the centrality of work and labour, both paid and unpaid. Without living labour, dead labour, or capital is 'dying' (non accumulating anymore). The pandemic demonstrated also that reproductive labour comes first, before paid labour. Without care for children, elder people or family members, the capacity to work for an employer or oneself is almost impossible. Remote working with home schooling was a disaster, not to speak about other examples.

The category of 'essential work' reflect both: the centrality of labour for society in order to function and the primacy of reproductive work : health care, food delivery, garbage collectors, maintenance for production of energy and transportation workers all are essential.

As David Graeber said quite boldly: 'the more your job is essential, the less you are paid....'

California study finds that essential workers saw a 30% increase in mortality in the first 10 months of the pandemic. This 30% increase is based on a comparison of the same age group (18-65) and job type from the previous year (2019), with 14,370 additional deaths in real terms.

A British survey (Occupational & Environmental Medicine) deliver same figures. Compared to non-essential workers, those working in health care were more than 7 times more likely to suffer a severe form (hospitalisation with possible death). Those working in essential services were 84% more risk of developing severe COVID-19.

Black and Asian but 'non-essential' workers were also more than 3 times more likely to develop a severe COVID-19 infection than white non-essential workers, while black and Asian essential workers were more than 8 times more likely to do so.

Since we know that essential workers are in their vast majority women and/or black or coloured (migrant), the centrality of labour also bears the traces of gender and racialised relations that are intertwined (intersectionnal) with class relations.

2. The global increase of paid and unpaid labour

- According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), the world labour force grew by 25 percent from 2000 to 2019. Those “employed” for an income grew from 2.6 billion to 3.3 billion over those first two decades of the twenty-first century, also by 25 percent. Of those “employed” in ILO terms, 53 percent were wage or salary earners, up from 43 percent in 1996; 34 percent were considered “own-account” workers, up from 31 percent in 1996; 11 percent “contributing family” workers, down from 23 percent in 1996; and 2 percent employers, down from 3.4 percent in that year.
- The use value of the commodity labour is producing is of secondary importance. While global service sector employment has grown by 61 percent in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, the international industrial workforce has increased by 40 percent.
- On a global scale, labour remains quintessential to capital accumulation in its present forms (Global Value Chains, digitised work etc.). Automation is much less developed than was predicted and each advance in automation calls in return for an extra surplus extraction out of human work/living labour: modern slavery occurs in extraction or rare metals as well as behind the internet (Mechanical Turk of Amazon micro-tasking, unpaid work delivered by customers, etc.).
- Labour and work experience (thus the labour process) played a primal role in the Gilets jaunes revolt: low wages, unfair employment relations, hardening work conditions, distrust regarding management, etc can be seen as a common ground for plebeian people revolting against unfair political decisions in a general context of growing inequality and sentiment of injustice.
- As Piketty and others demonstrated, specially regarding countries like France, even those belonging to better off categories, white collar employees, professionals, technicians or engineers are facing a degradation of their status and level of income. Without inheritance from parents, legacy of accumulated wealth, access to property is becoming more and more difficult for lower middle classes.
- Present evolution can be resumed by degradation, proletarization using gender and racial discriminations as a way to impose extra-surplus extraction.

3. Neoliberalism is ‘undoing the demos’

The present era contains some structural aspects that also have a strong impact upon democratic institutions and social protest. Wendy Brown analysed neoliberalism as a ‘stealth revolution’, undoing the demos and destroying liberal democracy.

According to her, neoliberalism undermines the promise of democracy as a system based upon institutions and practices, but also on a shared understanding of democracy as the specifically political reach by the people to hold and direct powers that otherwise would dominate the people.

'Once the economization of democracy's terms and elements is enacted in law, culture, and society, popular sovereignty becomes flatly incoherent. In markets, the good is generated by individual activity, not by shared political deliberation and rule. Where there are only individual capitals and marketplaces, « demos », the people, do not exist anymore.'

If we may agree with the idea that neoliberalism

- organises the domination of political life by capital.
- tend to reduce and destroy democratic practices, institutions, and imaginaries;
- That neoliberal rationality switches the meaning of democratic values from a political to an economic register. Liberty is disconnected from political participation and existential freedom. Liberty is reduced to market freedom unimpeded by regulation or any other form of government restriction.

Still, we should also understand that the process of ‘undoing the demos’ and the building up of an authoritarian regime with a democratic façade cannot remain uncontested given the growing social inequalities, economic hardship and socially unacceptable living conditions.

And, indeed, the last decade we have seen a growing discontent, many rebellions and upsurges ...

4. Strengths and weaknesses of disruptive and spontaneous mobilisations

An elitist view will tend to frame Gilets jaunes and spontaneous strike wave as emotional disruptions carried out by lost subjectivities and damaged identities. Of course, following such an approach, the next question is: 'Where is the shepherd?' (with technocratic or left populist answers)...

A more dialectical critical view recognises

1. That the social question is at the core of these conflicts and that class dynamics play a key role. The question of work / labour may be hidden or invisible but remains central in the sentiments of injustice.
2. Both for Gilet jaunes as for the strike wave, every day life and social existence were at stake. In both cases, the immediate conditions of life were under threat. The tax hikes igniting the Gilets jaunes revolt would have reduced monthly income by 100 up to 150 euros which would have made ordinary every day life unbearable.
3. Since the financial crisis of 2008, every day life of labouring classes is getting harder, people suffer from insufficient social welfare and social provisions, 'flexploitation' and economic precarity is very common, specially for younger generations.
4. On the subjective level, we can observe a growing discontent, not only marked by rejection of elites, the feeling of deep social injustice, but also aspects of 'retrotopia' ('everything was better before', cfr. Zygmunt Bauman) and certainly also elements of 'postcolonial melancholia' (Paul Gilroy), whiteness in combination with blurring class identity may offer an audience to extreme (neofascist) narratives.
5. Social conflicts induce 'agency' but this agency can be receptive for authoritarian narratives as well as being in favour of true social justice and real democratic policies.

5. Growing discontent is going global

It would be absolutely narrowminded to consider the Gilets jaunes upsurge as well as the spontaneous strike wave in Italy as exceptional events, occurring more or less in a random way...

Or occurring because of the crisis of liberal democracy with social buffer and redistribution. The latter is correct but these two examples of social protest can also be regarded as part of a wider process of growing social protest.

And indeed, looking back at the last 10-15 years, starting in 2010, we can observe at the global level a growing discontent expressed through wide movements of social protest.

- Although there is a fall in industrial action and strike activity – in comparison with the post-war era – still, during the last decade, we see a return of mass strikes. The European Trade Union Institute calculated that between 2010 and 2018 there were 64 general strikes in the European Union (almost half of them in Greece).
- On a global level, the ILO looking at just 56 countries, estimates there were 44,000 work stoppages between 2010 and 2019, mostly in manufacturing sector. The ILO notes, however, that given data limitations, the number of strikes “could be far greater than 44,000. China faced more than 6000 strikes in the years 2017-2019 alone.
- According to Versisk Maplecroft, a consultancy firm specialised in risk analysis, 47 countries (or almost a quarter of all nations), saw major social disruptions in 2019 alone.
- In their balance sheet of what they call ‘civil unrest’, they identify three major causes:
 1. A growing group of deprived and marginalised people
 2. Growing inequality and lowering living standards for the lower half of society;
 3. Governments incapable or unwilling to change these conditions.

6. Multitude or class?

- For Kim Moody, we entered an era of rebellions and social upsurge. And we should avoid to frame these as the expression of the 'multitude' but need to understand that their social nature is class based. For Moddy, a global working class is in the making.

'The seemingly mixed-class appearance of many of the mass strikers and demonstrators was also a result of the 'proletarianization' of educated people, such as teachers and nurses, whose jobs had been standardized (and subjected to tighter lean management and digitalised control), as well as the descent of many educated 'millennials' into working-class jobs. The lines of class appear blurred, but the social destiny of the majority of this generation and the next is clearly working class. Some of these show up in strikes of 'platform' workers, or delivery and other workers, newly discovered as 'essential' to social reproduction in the context of the pandemic, which is likely to accelerate this social transformation. (...)

'What seems clear is that whether or not students played an initiating role, and middle-class professionals and politicians co-opted leadership roles, the mass base of most rebellions of the last decade was working class in composition, and that to a considerable extent they employed the traditional weapon of the mass strike. This was the case whether or not they were union members or held permanent employment, much like the masses strikes observed by Rosa Luxemburg.

- For Kim Moody, at that time as much as now, 'his whole period has been an example of working-class self-activity with both economic and political demands'. And he concludes his essay with a quote of an radical trade union leader, Mark Meinster: 'Working-class upsurges often happen in the context of deep social changes in society as a whole, such as abrupt and widespread economic dislocation, a profound loss of legitimacy by ruling elites, or abnormal political instability.'

7. Remaking the demos through to rebuilding class antagonism

- Left populism advocates the ‘remaking the demos’ through a cleavage between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’, ‘the oligarchy’ or ‘la casta’.
- But, such an antagonism remains silent about
 - a). The systemic crisis of capitalism (inequality, ecological disasters, financialization and its havoc)
 - b). the global character of this crisis and the need to integrate this on the analytical level as well mobilizations.
 - c). The structural forms of oppression and exploitation, patriarchy and surplus extraction through wage labour
- Remaking the demos on the national level leads quite rapidly to advocating the restoration of sovereignty while agency limits itself to the demos or ‘the people’ which can be quite easily defined in a ethno-centrist (racist) way.
- This is less the case in Latin-America where ‘el pueblo’, includes mixed and Indigenous people.
- Still in Europe as well as in the USA, the ‘colour line’, and racist divisions remain very strong and cut through class divisions. In Europe (France, Italy, UK, Flanders, Netherlands), ‘whiteness’ as an identity to be defended is even getting stronger.
- Is it sufficient to oppose to this the idea of ‘creolisation’, multiculturalism as JL Mélenchon did during last campaigns? Even if this is a positive evolution, it do not think it will suffices.

8. The need to reformulate class analysis

- Sociological class analysis needs to be reformulated. The stratification/culturalist analysis inspired by Pierre Bourdieu is much too static and cannot be appropriated by those that mobilize themselves.
- Indeed, no one identify him / herself of being member of the ‘classes populaires’ or popular classes. ‘We are the people’ is a subjective and sometimes powerful identity when it comes to mobilization. In times of passivity and every day life, such a rhetoric remains open to ethnocentrism. Owen Jones 2011) exposed how Chavs was a way to stigmatize youth lower class subculture and how it became a counter-stigma ('We are chavs'). But the self-identification remains mainly white and is not as inclusive as former working class subcultures such as the ska movement (see Hall & Jefferson 2006)
- Bourdieu’s definition of popular classes is a nominal substitute for ‘classe ouvrière’ defined as it was by French (Stalinist) marxism or by statist socio-professional categorisation (blue collar productive workers). It leaves aside the so-called mostly female unproductive service workers as well as educated employees ('white collar') that are seen as part of middle classes. But with such a stratified class analysis, the structural antagonism between the labouring class and the ruling class of capitalists as a explanatory tool disappear. And by consequence, the analysis can only fall back to populist theories of Laclau and Mouffe of the (ordinary) people against the elite.
- Even if the classic marxist analysis of classes is more effective on the analytical level, it suffers from a dualist dichotomy between ‘class in itself’ and ‘class for itself’. The problem we face is how a class pass from the first to the second, to being a class ‘for itself’?
- Getting back to Edward P. Thompson and (the early) Antony Giddens, we may find some conceptual elements that helps us to reformulate a class analysis that is useful both on the analytical and performative/discursive level.
- For Anthony Giddens, the working class is first of all a process of objective and subjective structuration. Class boundaries (social mobility) or socio-economic (wealth, type of housing) and cultural characteristics (leisure, cultural capital, social capital, habitus etc.) are important but of a secondary matter.

Therefore, classes should not be understood as some kind of ‘territorial entities’. Several sources of structuration can be identified on a objective level:

- Employment relationship and labouring activity (the specifical technical nature of work is secondary)
- Distributive groupings (linked to access to welfare, engagement in reproductive work, sexual division of labour , spatial segregation, the colour line and racialised relations)

On a subjective level, a working class ‘for itself’ starts to exist

- with class awareness of inequality, but this still combine itself with the hope to get up the social ladder and to ‘escape’ form its social class origins...
- A second level of consciousness is achieved when collective identity and reflexivity about antagonisms intervene. In other words, when a conflict of interest is seen in a collective antagonistic way. This can be the case solely on at the shopfloor level as well in a enlarged way, with a certain worldview. It can also be combined with passivity and scepticism towards collective action (resignation). But such a consciousness can be nourished by anger and lead to revolt: ‘the structuring of the (working) class is necessarily expressed in terms of action-oriented goals’.
- Some major problems remain unsolved: internationalisation and interconnecting class with struggle against women oppression/patriarchy as well as the struggle against racial discrimination that is deeply rooted in imperialism and colonialism
- For sure, the blurred class antagonism remain mainly structured on the national level, although we may see in Europe some timid elements of internationalisation around common issues. But international organisations remain very tiny and without influence or very much institutionalised.
- The successes of the global women strike shows that direct action immediately becomes a source of identification and propels mobilisation. Attempts to organise a striking day of migrant workers could go to same way.
- As we know, many factors push towards the globalisation of social movements. Capitalism became globalised (again) and the systemic crisis is also global. We can see this on the level of economic issues (monetary instability, inflation, debts etc.), the growing social inequality, the pandemic and health crisis, war as well as the environmental crisis. All major threats humanity is facing exist on local, national and global level.

Some general conclusive remarks to be discussed

Social uprisings, strike waves as well as micro-conflicts have some commonalities which are not new nor inevitable:

- An important lack of organisational resources, taking place outside traditional organisations that are embedded and institutionalised. They suffer from the absence or dysfunctional institutional frameworks for recognition and negotiation but at the same time they free themselves from these frameworks that fulfil the role of a buffer and tend to de-politize social conflicts;
- They face very often a repressive (state) environment as well as tight managerial repression in the labour process;
- They occur with the combination of blurred class boundaries and the permanence of structural antagonism (labour versus capital or society versus profit, ...);
- They tend to lack of general articulated narrative with performative qualities: mobilised agency need to reinvent almost everything during a short time lapse. The spontaneous strike wave shows that this is not a fatality.
- Key conditions of success regarding mobilisations imply a certain continuity, the building up of organisation/political strength and a strategic vision linked with a project / horizon / alternative. The fact that last decade of the 19th century, socialism played such a role, has supported every day struggles and increased willingness to engage.

- Both the Gilet jaunes revolt as the spontaneous strike wave in Italy can only be considered as a step towards the structuration of a conscious class oriented action if it leads to renewing and consolidating degree of organisation as well as socio-political discourses that are making sense of them as part of a ‘bigger picture’, understand correctly the real antagonisms that polarises society.
- In ‘times of disaster’, with an unravelling ecological crisis, recurrent financial instability as well as warmongering and on the background a deepening social crisis (unequal access to education, health and public services) as well as a growing crisis in employment relations (with a critique of capitalist work relations), the struggle for social justice, equality and emancipation is becoming an existential issue for the vast majority of the population as well as for humanity itself.
- Institutional forms of conflict (collective bargaining, regulated social dialogue, agile management or formal parliamentary democracy) are loosening ground. Conflicts and mobilisations beyond law and regulation tend to become platforms for subjectivity and reflexivity that can become receptive for a more general critique of the present social order as structurally unfair, dysfunctional, hazardous and toxic for humanity.
- Still, mobilisations and collective action need to acknowledge class based relations as much as gender (sexist) and racialist forms of oppressions without which the general critique will tend to become moralistic /ethic or even religious. The critique of class/gender and race relations of oppression and exploitation is part of the same critique regarding capitalist property relations, the exclusive control over basic resources for the needs of a infime minority and the active use (abuse) of state institutions for governing the state of affairs following their interests.

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