Are movements opposed to climate-change policy necessarily anti-environmental? A review of social science research on the Yellow Vests' environmental attitudes.

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Abstract The French Yellow Vest (YV) movement was born out of the opposition to an increase in carbon taxation. It has therefore been conventionally depicted as an anti-environmental protest. This article challenges this view, based on a review of scholarship on YVs and on the environmental values, actions and mobilizations of underprivileged citizens. We start with an overview of the studies available on the YVs' characteristics and their relationship to ecology and draw on different large-N data to show that YVs are on average similar to the French general population, with low levels of environmental concerns, a distance from "institutional environmentalism". The coexistence of an ecological block and an anti-ecological block within the movement is not peculiar to YVs. We recall how carbon taxes generate right-wing contestation resisting taxation in general, but also opposition from left-wing activists concerned with social justice and/or the climate crisis. Local interactions with environmentalist mobilizations result in spatial variations and changes over time in YVs' environmental attitudes. Finally, we emphasize the varieties of environmentalism among dominated social groups. The conclusion derives lessons on the drivers of contestation of climate policy and draws avenues for further research.

Keywords:

Yellow Vest; environmentalism; political ecology; carbon taxes; social movement; France

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Introduction:

Climate scientists have advocated the quick implementation of stringent and long-lasting climate-change policies almost unanimously for over three decades (Houghton et al., 1990; IPCC, 2021). These policies rely on several instruments, whose legitimacy and efficiency are challenged in multiple ways (Cashmore and Wejs, 2014; Martin and Islar, 2021). More specifically, the use of taxation to boost the environmental transition, often presented as a core instrument by a large range of economists (e.g. Stiglitz et al., 2018) and environmentalists, faces public opposition (Carattini et al., 2018; Mehleb et al., 2021). The consensus that dominates the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has found no equivalent in the political realm (van der Sluijs et al., 2010).

It seems more urgent than ever to grasp the reasons leading citizens to oppose climate policies. It might be tempting to attribute them to plain and simple anti-environmentalism. We challenge this view and contend that contestation cannot be understood without accounting for conflicts with other objectives, such as private consumption, employment, economic growth on the one hand, and social objectives on the other (Jamison, 2010; Kuyper et al., 2018). In a context of increasing real and perceived inequalities (Chancel, 2020), environmental taxation is also accused of shifting the burden onto poor and middle-class citizens who cannot afford greener ways of living (Hsu, 2020).

The French Yellow Vest (YV) movement offers unique insight into the motives for contesting climate policies. Triggered at the end of 2018 by a decision of the French government to increase fuel tax levels, it was initially depicted as an anti-environmental protest, similar to previous anti-green taxation revolts. Such judgments were expressed, among others, by several environmental NGOs supporting an increase in fuel taxes (Mehleb et al., 2021). The strategic support to YVs expressed by several radical rightwing climate

deniers, including D. Trump in the United States, J. Bolsonaro in Brazil and M. Le Pen in France (Driscoll, 2021) corroborated this view.

However, as we show in this review, social science investigations challenge the thesis according to which YVs were primarily driven by anti-environmentalism, in the sense that they would be indifferent to environmental degradation and hostile to any form of environmental policies. Empirical evidence reveals that YVs' low levels of environmental concerns and distance from "institutional environmentalism" range in the average of the general population. YVs are yet more polarized, in line with other movements against carbon taxation policies and reflecting local interactions with environmental movements. Adopting broader conceptions of environmental attitudes and practices allows to establish that they are not absent within the YVs, but take the form of what is being conceptualized as "environmentalism of the poor" or "working-class ecology".

We start this article by presenting a methodological overview of the empirical studies on the YVs'. This rich empirical basis is then used to depict YVs' relationship to environmentalism that appears to be much more diversified than was commonly expected. We then broaden the focus to shed light on this heterogeneity: conventional environmental sociology and political science literature underline a more general gap between protesting against carbon taxation and anti-environmental values in general. Scholarship in environmental sociology on the superposition of class divides and environmental engagement sheds light on both the heterogeneity of the YVs' environmental attitudes and their gradual transformation during the course of the movement itself. In addition, diverse and frequent interactions with simultaneous climate protests lead to the emergence of an environmental justice narrative within the YVs. Finally, we show that analytical frameworks characterizing the relationship to environmentalism of dominated social groups, account better for YVs' environmental

attitudes and practices than the thesis of an anti-environmental movement. The YVs triggered the politicization of specific ecologies, rooted in working-class early socialization and the daily experience of coping with scarce resources. As we discuss in conclusion, research on the yellow vests have considerable implications as to the drivers of contestation of climate policy and their social acceptability.

1. Yellow Vests and the environment: a burgeoning research field

The YV movement offers social scientists an unprecedented opportunity to investigate the recomposition of social movements in democracies faced with the ecological challenge, and more generally how they face the ecological crisis. An impressive number of studies scrutinize this movement, covering a wide range of theoretical and disciplinary approaches. This makes the YVs one of the main topics addressed by social scientists in France in recent years (Ravelli, 2022). Despite the context in which the movement emerged, YVs' environmental attitudes and behavior have not been at the center of inquiries. Yet, several investigations deliver preliminary results on this aspect. One can distinguish results based on field or online quantitative surveys (Table 1) from others grounded in mixed-methodology, qualitative ethnographic or sociological fieldwork (Table 2).

A first strand of research approaches the movement's relationship to environmentalism based on surveys conducted on large samples of participants to the YVs. The *Jaune Vif* survey (n=1477), initiated by researchers from the Centre Emile Durkheim (Bordeaux) in November, 2018, was the largest, face-to-face empirical data collection initiative conducted during the movement. Most fieldwork (and respondents) were located in major French urban areas,

although smaller towns and villages were also investigated. The 33-item questionnaire included 4 open-ended questions allowing respondents to explain the reasons for their commitment and to express their opinion on fuel taxation (for more information on the methodological design of the *Jaune Vif Survey*, see : Collectif d'enquête sur les Gilets Jaunes, 2019).

The *BAROC (Baromètre Opinion Occitanie)* survey (n=2,000), led by a research team at Montpellier University (Cepel), took place in the Occitanie region in spring 2019 (first wave). The 85-question-long questionnaires were administered face-to-face at home and included several questions on environmental values and behavior. This survey was designed before the formation of the Yellow Vests movement with the aim of studying citizens' relationship to environmentalism as well as the emergence of new political cleavages. However, researchers took the fieldwork as an opportunity to ask several questions aimed at identifying active participants in the Yellow Vests movement (243 respondents): occupation of roundabouts, participation in blockades and/or 'free toll' operations and demonstrations (for more details on the *BAROC* survey, see: Dormagen et al. 2021).

A research team at the Pacte laboratory (Grenoble) conducted an ad-hoc online survey, the *Grande enquête sur les Gilets jaunes (GEGJ)*, via the social network Facebook (n=5,500). The network through which most of the protests were organized was hence used as a survey base, which allowed respondents to be recruited for a self-administered survey. This type of 'Socially Mediated Internet Survey' (Cassese et al., 2013) is adapted to a rare population (Klar and Leeper, 2019), on which there can be no sampling framework. The 52-items questionnaire included one question on the most important issue to them – with the environment as one of the possible options – and one question on the trade-off between environmental protection and the standard of living. Two open-ended questions also allowed

respondents to present their thoughts on the environment if they were willing to (for more details on the *GEGJ* survey, see: Guerra et al. 2021).

Table 1. Large-N surveys on the yellow vest movement

Programme	Place and period of study	Approach
Jaune Vif (PI: Magali Della Sudda, Tinette Schnatterer and Camille Bedock, Centre Emile Durkheim, see Collectif d'enquête sur les Gilets Jaunes, 2019)	Major French urban areas, smaller towns and villages; November 2018 – April 2019	Face-to-face survey based on 33-item questionnaire, carried out among 1,477 participants to blockades or demonstrations in the 21 YV "waves"
BAROC Baromètre Opinion Occitanie (PI: research team at Montpellier University, Cepel, see Dormagen et al. 2021)	Occitanie Region; Spring 2019	Face-to-face survey of 2,000 individuals (representative and randomly sampled from the region's electoral lists), based on a 85-items questionnaire Active YVs were identified based on questions about respondents' participation in occupations of roundabouts, blockades and/or 'free toll' operations, or demonstrations.
Grande enquête sur les Gilets jaunes (GEGJ, research team at Pacte – Sciences Po Grenoble, Guerra et al. 2021)	France; December 2018 – April 2019 (wave 1); September 2019 – November 2019 (wave 2)	Ad-hoc self-administered online survey, based on a 52-item questionnaire, of 5,500 respondents recruited via Facebook, i.e. the network through which most of the protests were organized.

In parallel to these surveys, local-scale research using qualitative fieldwork methods, such as ethnography, opened other lines of inquiry. Based on the observation of the engagement of local groups, they described how these groups built and shared alternative social-ecological systems fortifying their collective action, supporting their demands and materializing their values.

The importance of such fieldwork for the emergence of a research agenda should be emphasized: such studies and approaches are still often unpublished in peer-reviewed journals, but their partial accounts offer stimulating perspectives. Embedded qualitative research leads to questioning the dominant, normative narrative on what environmentalism is or should be. As we elaborate in Section 4, this reveals unexpected, alternative ecological

practices corresponding to what A. Tsing would call the “arts of living on a damaged planet” (Tsing et al., 2017). Charting the numerous studies that trace, through a mere description of small-scale practices, infra- or micro-political ecologies in the daily life of YV groups or individual participants in the movement is not an easy task. First, because part of them were undertaken by scholars with precarious or student status, with uneven access to scientific publications. Second, because of the very dependence of such methods on long-term fieldwork. To date, most of them use participatory observation as their main methodology, data being collected mostly during the first 18 months of the movement (i.e. until the first COVID confinement in March 2020). We chart in table 2 those among published qualitative studies that provide an in-depth and specific focus on environmental attitudes. Nonetheless, we adopted an open conceptualization of ecological matters taking into account structural constraints faced by individuals in verbalizing, interacting, politicizing and adapting their behavior to environmental issues and hazards (e.g. Dickson, 2000). We will thus also refer in the course of this review to a wider range of works that address engagement within anti-green taxation movements from below, by scrutinizing mundane, relational ecologies in which their protagonists participate.

Table 2. Qualitative or mixed-methods studies addressing the environmental attitudes of Yellow Vests as a main topic (2018-2022)

Authors	Place and date	Methodology
Mehleb, Kallis, Zografos (2021)	2019, France	Quantitative text analysis and 33 qualitative interviews
Gaborit, Grémion, Della Sudda (2022)	2018-2020, Oise, Isère, Gironde	Questionnaires, observations, interviews
Martin and Islar (2021)	Unspecified, France	Discourse and image analyses
Driscoll (2021)	2019, France	In-depth interviews with 31 Yellow Vests, supplemented mainly by primary text analysis
Faburel et al. (2021)	Unspecified, Rhône	Interviews in Auvergne Rhône-Alpes (number unspecified)
Dondeyne et Levain (2021)	2018-2020, Finistère	Observations, interviews (number unspecified), and qualitative text analysis in Fnistère
Chiron (2021)	2019, Gironde	Participatory observation
Vollaire (2021)	2019, Paris Suburbs, Assemblies of the assemblies meetings	Participatory observation in YVs assemblies

Large-N quantitative methods and qualitative fieldwork articulate complementary perspectives on a long-lasting and dispersed movement and its relationship to environmentalism. The next section draws primarily on large-N research to characterize YVs main traits. These results cast doubt on their reduction to an anti-environmentalist movement. Qualitative investigations are subsequently used to shed light on this heterogeneity and to derive implications with regard to the conceptualization of environmentalism.

2. Divided on the environment and distant from institutional environmentalism: not so different from the general population

The socio-demographic characteristics of the YVs should lead them to be distant, or even hostile to environmental policies. Sociology of environmentalism shows the prevalence within environmentalist citizens of the profiles that are underrepresented amongst YVs: urban, young, and educated citizens (Anderson et al., 2017; Shwom et al., 2015). YVs see, on the contrary, an overrepresentation of poorer citizens who are less likely to support stringent climate policies (Scruggs and Benegal, 2012), especially in times of economic crisis (Benedetta and Memoli, 2019). The only positive confounder would be gender: females are overrepresented among YVs (Guerra et al., 2021) as well as among pro-environmental citizens (Crawley et al., 2020). Nonetheless, large-N surveys on YVs depict a greater diversity within the movement regarding environmental concerns than what could be assumed.

2.1. As ecologically (un-)committed as the rest of the French population

While YVs are less well-off, urban, young and educated than the general population, their attitudes towards the environment is actually very similar to that of the general population. Concerns about the degradation of the environment are not absent in the responses to the GEGJ open-ended questions, but surveyed YVs do not devote greater attention to the environment than the general French population. 8% of the 5,500 respondents selected the environment and global warming as the most important issue for France today. This makes it only the 5th most important issue in the sample, far behind socio-economic issues – 25% of respondents chose purchasing power as the most important issue, 24% inequalities, 16%

poverty and precariousness, and 9% taxes. However, this proportion is the same as that of the French population according to the ADEME's 2018 annual barometer (ADEME et al., 2019: 7).

Based on results from the *BAROC* survey, Dormagen, Michel and Reungoat (2021) provide further insight into the ecological values and praxis of the YVs and explored the specificities of their supporters compared to the general sample as regards ecological issues. Respondents claiming to support the YVs are hardly any different from the general Occitanie sample in their positions on ecological issues. For instance, 88% consider climate change to be real (90% in the general sample), 75% that it is mainly due to human activities (73% in the global sample), and 74% (against 73%) that fighting climate change should be a political priority. No significant differences emerge as regards carbon dependency, based on their mobility habits and ways of moving around: YVs do not drive and do not own cars more than other respondents (but they use diesel vehicles more); they do not express any specific reluctance towards electric vehicles, whose acquisition is encouraged by local and national public authorities. More generally, they comply with the institutionalized norms of ecologically virtuous individual behavior in the same proportion as the average – leading Dormagen et al. to the conclusion that YVs are shown to be "as ecologically committed (or as little) as the rest of the population".

In another large quantitative survey addressing the specificities of the YVs' relationship to environmental matters, social psychologists Girerd et al. (2020) conclude that YVs endorse environmental protection slightly more than a non-YV control group. These converging results make the case for reconsidering the YVs' alleged anti-environmentalism and the fact that the environment would be a non-priority demand of the movement.

2.2. Distance from institutional environmentalism but no opposition to environmentalism per se

The *Jaune Vif* survey shows YVs' distance from institutional environmentalism – i.e., Green parties and environmental organization –not different from the average French citizen. This distance was massive during the first weeks of the movement and tended to decrease afterwards. Although the entire spectrum of French political parties was represented in responses to a question about past votes, the main French Green party, Europe Ecologie-Les Verts (EELV), received little support – a result confirmed by the *GEGJ* survey. In the *BAROC* survey, the picture is more nuanced. When asked if they would ever vote for EELV, 60% of the YVs consider it "possible" (59% for the general Occitanie sample), which is quite high compared to the other political parties suggested. Yet, the proportion considering it "impossible" was significantly higher than in the general sample (35% vs. 29%).

The *Jaune Vif* survey provides another indicator of this distance from institutional political ecology: very few respondents mentioned a past or present affiliation to a green party, and only 3.8% of them stated being or having been a member of an environmentalist NGO, in the broad sense. Among the public personalities to whom respondents stated feeling close, only one could be labeled for his environmental engagement: Nicolas Hulot, who had resigned from his position as Minister of the Environment a few weeks before to protest against the lack of environmental commitment of E. Macron's government.

This distance from institutional environmentalism is consistent with the YVs' overall distance from institutionalized politics in general and should not be considered as an opposition to environmentalism *per se*. The answers to the open-ended question in the *Jaune Vif* survey on the increase in fuel taxation reveal that opposing environmental policies was not the YVs' prime target. A non-negligible number of respondents even expressed their

attachment to environmental values. Gaborit and Grémion (2019), based on 927 replies to open questions, show that only 2.8% of respondents spontaneously expressed an opposition to ecology in general or to the specific measure targeted by the movement *per se*. As the authors note, this result should be considered with caution: the greatest part of the sample was collected during a period of strong public criticism regarding the legitimacy and clarity of YV demands (Nov. 2018-Jan.2019). Many respondents perceived this criticism as cutting and unfair and might have reacted by complying with the desirable answer (for a broader analysis of this bias in the context of ecologizing public policies, see: Malier, 2019). It is furthermore telling that only few respondents (3%) mentioned an opposition to environmentalism as a reason for protesting. Opposition to fuel taxation is rather justified with regard to mistrust of the government, which is accused of using ecological taxation as a ploy to serve other interests and purposes. The uncertainties associated with replacing combustion engines with new mobility technologies (especially the electric car) are a further argument frequently put forward. Yet, the authors also note that 20% of interviewees link their position to the unfairness of the measure, which weighs upon already impoverished people, while "major polluters" are left unaffected.

These results tally with those obtained by Mehleb et al. (2021), who conducted a mixed-method survey to analyze YVs' statements about the carbon tax in 2019. These statements did not cluster around one narrative, but around as much as four discursive profiles: critique of capitalism; fairer pro-environmental state; purchasing power; corporate responsibility and inequality.

2.3. YVs' internal polarization on environmental issues

Environmental issues stand out as one of the most divisive topics among the movement's protagonists in the *BAROC* survey (as are, for instance: immigration control, the death

penalty, or civil and social rights for foreigners). This polarization appears in the cluster analysis with the coexistence of what Dormagen et al. (2021) call a "consistent ecological block" inside the YV movement. This ecological block is associated with a set of predictive variables such as voting for Jean-Luc Mélenchon (La France Insoumise's candidate for the last presidential election, for which there was no Green candidate), being young, identifying themselves with the middle class and being a graduate. This block encompasses, in the survey, 12.5% of YV supporters. This result is consistent with the ones obtained in the same period among participants in Climate Marshes, who were asked about their degree of support to the YVs movement (see: Le Lann et al., 2021). At the other end of the spectrum, the BAROC team identifies an "anti-ecological block" which massively rejects the EELV vote or the energy transition – but is still cut across by generational divides as regards individual ecological behaviors (such as the consumption of organic food). The movement thus attracted the most pro-ecological individuals and the most climate change skeptic ones *at the same time*.

Other large surveys allow to zoom in on those portions of the YVs who express strong concerns about the environment. In the GEGJ survey (Guerra et al. 2021), over 400 respondents (8% of the sample) stated that the environment was the most important problem facing France, raising questions about to what extent their sociopolitical profile differs from the rest of the YVs. While gender, the place of residence or occupation do not provide much explanation, age and level of education do: 15% of those who hold a Bachelor or a Master's degree stated that the environment is the most important problem, against 8% of those who are high-school graduates and about 3% of those with the lowest level of education. In the same way, while 15% of 18-24 year-olds chose the environment, this is the case for only 5% of those aged 65 and over.

Greater concern for the environment is also marked among those who stated being very interested in politics (11%, against 4% for those not at all interested), those with previous experience of social movements (11%) and those who identify as left-wing (11%) and far left-wing (17%). The distribution of other indicators of environmental concern, such as "being ready to reduce one's standard of living to protect the environment" or having participated in a climate march is also structured according to the same sociopolitical characteristics.

In short, large-scale surveys provide solid evidence for a strong diversity of ecological attitudes among YVs. This diversity is not peculiar to the YVs, but they tend to be more polarized than the average French population. The most concerned about environmental issues are the youngest, the most educated, the most politicized and the most left-wing, i.e. those who resemble the more pro-environmental citizens among the general French population (Gougou and Persico 2019) or the current electorate of green parties (Grant and Tilley, 2019). As we discuss in the following section, YVs' heterogeneity of attitudes towards environmentalism also reflects the more general opposition of competing framings in debates on carbon taxation. Local convergence with environmentalist mobilizations have led to a growing politicization of environmental protection around climate justice frames.

3. Contesting taxation vs. environmental justice: the clash between two frames

3.1. A history of conflicts over (carbon) taxation in France

Carbon taxation is often described as a policy instrument aligned with the dominant liberal economic philosophy of limiting government spending through incentives. Although EU

leaders advocate it as a regulatory tool for international trade, member states have not yet implemented it as part of a coordinated agenda (Jordan et al., 2012). Criticism rests on three different lines of arguments at least. Only a minority would fundamentally question the existence of climate change and the necessity to fight it. Others voice social justice concerns and accuse carbon taxation of placing the greater burden on low-income households, which proportionally dedicate a larger part of their income on carbon expenses like heating and filling car tanks (Douenne, 2020). Carbon taxation also stumbles over general resistance to taxation.

Opposition to taxation might be a powerful trigger of anti-carbon-taxation mobilization in the French context. Portrayed as a "light green" country, where the technocratic approach to environmental protection dominates (Bess, 2003), France is indeed one of the countries with the highest overall taxation levels, associated with the widespread use of taxation as a general, non-targeted tool for financing public policies (Castagnède, 2008). French public opinion features a high level of "resistance towards taxation" (Spire, 2018). Several events have illustrated this opposition in history, from the pre-revolutionary *Jacqueries* to the Poujadist movement in the 1950s (Wright, 1955; Schields, 2004), a movement that shared some characteristics with the YVs, such as its rural and small-town foothold and the over-representation of small-business owners among its protagonists (Collectif d'enquête sur les gilets jaunes, 2019).

The *Bonnets Rouges* (Red Hats) movement has also been invoked as a more recent precedent to the YVs (e.g. Spire, 2019; Blavier, 2020). This movement deployed in Brittany (2012-2013) opposed the implementation of an eco-tax for heavy vehicles and the installation of road gantries. *Bonnet Rouges* and YVs share an opposition to a form of carbon taxation and similar repertoires of action involving the occupation, blocking and dismantlement of road infrastructures. Yet, there were also strong differences between both movements. First, the

right-wing and anti-environmental orientation of the *Bonnets Rouges* (Le Coadic, 2014) was clearer than the YVs, due to the preeminent role taken by pro-agroindustry politicians, union leaders and entrepreneurs in the movement (Aubert, 2019). This led to counter-protests, led by worker unions and left-wing and/or environmentalist organizations (Rabier, 2015), while no such counter-movement opposed the YVs.

Scholars have depicted the *Bonnets Rouges* as a "mirror movement" of the Tea Party, rooted in identity politics and in the defense of corporate interests (Busby and Hoey, 2018). At first sight, the YVs could also be depicted as a classical defiance towards carbon policies, taxation and regulation altogether, attitudes that tend to go hand in hand in the US context (e.g. Hochschild, 2018). Yet, such a bundle is not observable in the European context (Douenne and Fabre, 2020) and does not seem to be at play among YVs. The main driver of their mobilization rather originates in concerns for purchasing power and living conditions rather than anti-environmentalism. A recent survey among the French population (n=3002) shows for instance that respondents sympathizing with the YV movement justified this with regard to widely shared pessimistic beliefs about the effect of the carbon tax on their purchasing power (Douenne and Fabre, 2020).

The trajectory of Pricillia Ludosky, one of the movement's prominent figures, offers an interesting illustration of the prevalence of concerns over purchasing power. As many authors recall, one of the founding appeals of the Yellow Vests Movement was the petition written by this independent entrepreneur in organic products on the *Change.org* platform in May 2018. Her petition gathered more than 1 million signatures during the spring, summer and autumn 2018 (Farbiaz, 2019; Ravelli, 2022). While acknowledging the desirability of fighting pollution, the petition contests the instrument of taxation and claims that citizens should not "pay the price" for pollution. The diffusion of Ludosky's argumentation among the YVs at

the early stage of the movement is patent in the answers to the Jaune Vif survey (e.g., Gaborit and Gremion, 2019; Dondeyne and Levain, 2021).

Opposition to increases in carbon taxation generally comes, in a nutshell, from two different blocks: right-wing liberals blaming excessive burden of taxation, and left-wing climate justice activists, resisting this policy given its partiality and unfairness. The focus on fuel taxation as the only climate policy instrument is therefore also criticized by climate justice activists *within* the climate movement (Della Porta and Parks, 2014). The core characteristics of this environmental justice frame have been only partially conceptualized in France in recent years (Gramaglia, 2014; Copland, 2020). As the next subsection shows, this frame has contributed to the re-politicization of environmental concerns within parts of the YV movement.

3.2. The *in itinere* politicization of environmental concerns in parts of the YV movement

The presence in the movement of pro-environmental forces initially derives from the engagement of single YV protagonists in environmentalist movements. This can be exemplified by Ludosky's social position and later trajectory (see Ludosky's own account: Ludosky, 2019; and also: Sénac, 2021: 10 and following) as well as in the case of local leaders, in particular on the *La Réunion* Island (Lucas, thesis in progress). Importantly, various studies show that the movement experienced a growing politicization of environmental concerns *in itinere*. Scholars working on environmental movements scrutinized the gradual structuration of environmental discourses and criticisms inside and around the YV movement, often framed in terms of environmental justice (Kipfer, 2019; Kinniburgh, 2019; Le Lann et al., 2021). As we will see, this is notably due to multiple local YVs movements' interactions with environmentalist movements.

Analyzing the intensity and circulation of Facebook posts among YV groups, Cointet et al. (2021) identify four phases: preparation of the movement, before Nov. 17, 2018; intensification, until the beginning of the Great Debate in January 2019, installation until summer 2019; and finally a loss of momentum. In its early phase (preparation and November 2018 uprising), the movement is not primarily focused on environmental protection. The topic gains in salience in the intensification phase, but primarily to respond to disqualifications of the movement as anti-environmentalist (e.g. Baber, 2019). According to convergent online inquiries and ethnographic observations, the first semester of 2019 (installation phase) saw the movement shift to the left, relocate its group actions, and sporadically embrace environmentalism in local struggles.

This shift was also reinforced by the simultaneity of the YV mobilization and the Climate Marches from 2018 to 2020, both at the national and local scales. Interactions were frequent, took various forms, and contributed to shape the YV movement. Such interactions indeed tended to increase in 2019, as Ravelli et al. (2020) have incidentally observed in an analysis of the movement's main internal governance procedures (horizontal deliberation and direct democracy). Participatory governance procedures informed by left-wing activism resulted in the marginalization of far-right leaders and in the dissemination of left-wing narratives on how the environmental crisis and social inequalities were intertwined. These narratives were summarized in the striking formula "End of the world, end of the month: same fight!", which was the flagship slogan of the leftwing party La France Insoumise's support for the movement.

Multi-site ethnography has described such mutual influence, cross-fertilization and the co-staging of local environmental and YV protests. Common experiences of pollution, resource mismanagement and/or elite capture, along with a shared local anchorage favored these movements' convergence. In the Finistère department, the evolution of the movement's

relationship to environmentalism in the early months of 2019 is shaped by local political and ecological configurations (Dondeyne & Levain, 2021).

The locations of events and occupations diversified, and so did the preoccupations in which the YVs got involved, with an extension towards local environmental and social struggles. This led to the engagement of some YV groups in concrete actions, repertoires and imaginaries of the environmental movement – e.g. ZAD (Zone-to-Defend) –, which has been highlighted by several authors (Huët, 2019; Genevois, 2020; Balibar et al., 2020; Dondeyne & Levain, 2021; Della Sudda, Godefroy and Lucas, 2022).

The literature offers interesting examples of this turn to the left and to more radical environmentalism. In Finistère, local YVs decided to exclude some of their members who were closer to the *Bonnets Rouges* from the "assembly of assemblies" organized in Brest. Meanwhile, 400 YVs joined inhabitants and environmental activists such as Youths for climate to protest against a gas power plant project undertaken by the French energy company *Total* and public authorities. The YVs also reinforced counter-mobilization against such projects in several regional centres, for instance in Normandy (Elalaoui, thesis in progress; Elalaloui, 2021). Other groups of Finistère YVs took to the beaches and supported new forms of environmental protests taking place on the coasts to fight against the concentration of farms and the degradation of water quality. In the same period, 200 YVs came to support a young organic farmer threatened with losing his family farm for lack of solvency, to the profit of a well-known conventional wealthy one. Some of these YVs, who were close neighbors, became involved in various actions lasting for more than a year to save the farm by raising funds, appealing for public and media support and defending the case before the courts and authorities. They finally won this case. In other situations, the willingness to join forces and use new repertoires failed – e.g., when local YVs tried to set up a "ZAD" (zone-to-defend) on the beach. Although they shared an attachment to their

environment and the experience of its degradation, the trajectories and repertoires of action of the ecological activists were in some cases too different from those of the YVs to get them onboard.

In any case, these local simultaneous scenes exemplify how the YVs' endorsement of environmental issues is intertwined with an attachment to social justice. They shed light on the conditions under which environmental concerns have grown within parts of the YV movement. In a sense, YVs were not looking for the environment, but found it locally in the course of their mobilization. They have then unexpectedly contributed to amplify and comfort environmental protests. Frames stressing the necessity to bridge social and environmental justice have played an important role in this process.

4. Anti- eco-taxation mobilizations and popular environmentalism from below

We have seen that despite a strong defiance of YVs towards institutional environmentalism, they are not unanimously indifferent to environmental concerns, but connect them to "end of the month" issues. In this regard, YVs' environmental attitudes may be better captured by broader conceptions of environmentalism designed with a focus on poor citizens. Such conceptions focus on day-to-day practices rather than declared support for environmental protection.

4.1. Environmentalism of the poor, working-class environmentalism or first-world political ecology?

The environmentalism "of the poor" thesis has been much discussed in the wake of Joan Martínez-Alier and Ramachandra Guha's seminal work (Guha and Martinez-Alier, 1997;

Guha and Advani, 2006; Martinez-Alier, 2003). These authors contend that specific forms of environmentalism are rooted in poor citizens' experience of social conflicts, uneven distribution of resources (especially hydrocarbons) and exposure to environmental degradation, which often leads them to reject environmental norms and discourses as avatars of colonialism. As Nixon (2011) stresses, this concept has been instrumental in "diversifying [North American and European environmentalist scholars and activists'] vision of what counts as environmentalism" (284). Beyond deconstructing environmentalism as a prerogative of affluent Westerners, these authors also investigate how engagement towards nature conservation is driven by necessity for dominated social groups.

Yet, the categories defined by Martinez-Alier and Guha are not easily transferable from the so-called "South" to Western contexts, where consumption practices, the connection to nature and land, as well as the social and political structuration of class conflicts largely differ (Flipo, 2021). Attempts to adjust concepts related to the environmentalism of the poor in Western contexts have followed two main paths so far.

The first is rooted in Marxist studies of social movements, the sociology of work and organizations, and draws on the concept of "working-class ecologies" (Keil, 1994; Barca, 2012; Bell, 2021). The focus is generally on struggles and social mobilizations in industrial workplaces for the improvement of the quality of life and the environment. Studies point to the sociological and political obstacles to the emergence of an audible, articulated counter-hegemonic discourse (Keil, 1994). As Barca (2012) notes, such an agenda would require a "political ecology of work" around a work-health-space nexus, in order to avoid oppositions between "jobs" and "the environment" (see also Blaikie, 1999).

The second research path, known as first-world political ecology, focuses on the specific conditions of developing political ecology approaches within post-industrialized countries, which have been abundantly discussed (e.g. Robbins, 2002; Schroeder, 2005). Mc Carthy's

ethnography of the Wise Use Movement in the United States (2002) played an instrumental role in this debate. It generated a research agenda for studying rural conservative grassroots social movements campaigning against state regulation of access to natural resources. The goal was to reflect on scholars' normative orientations as well as to account better for the daily ecological experiences and praxis of protagonists in the rural West.

Few scholars have explicitly endorsed this perspective in the European and French contexts. However, recent research emphasizes that social classes experience the energy transition in highly uneven ways. They underline for instance how calls for decarbonation go hand in hand with a moralization of consumption practices, directed in particular at people experiencing 'energy poverty' and precariousness (Cacciari, 2017; Middlemiss et al., 2018). These targets are demarcated from idealized citizen representations constructed by "energy democracy" promoters (Szulecki, 2018; Sovacool, 2021). Scholars also investigate the attitudes of grassroots social movements in the spatial and social peripheries of post-industrial countries through the prism of their members' high dependency on carbon. By doing so, they emphasize that understanding contemporary social movements resisting climate policies rests on a holistic and pragmatic approach relating material subsistence, justification and the quest for autonomy.

4.2. Popular ecologies scrutinized through YV praxis

Given the strong overrepresentation of working-class and/or poor citizens in the YV movement, concepts developed to address the environmentalism of the poor seem promising to make sense of their environmental attitudes.

As a matter of fact, many fragments of discourses and spontaneous comments of *Jaune Vif* interviewees raise unexpected topics and expressions that can be related to environmental

hazards, expertise, concerns, or what we could call environmental anxiety or disquiet. For instance, 9% of respondents stated that their participation was an act of solidarity with people struggling to get by or “future generations” - a discourse category anchored in environmental advocacy and rhetoric. Moreover, the *Jaune Vif* observations suggest that many of the YVs have practices that are de facto ecologically virtuous, such as giving priority to local products, decreasing energy consumption or pooling equipment and material resources. These practices can be considered falling within working-class environmentalism, without being necessarily motivated by explicit environmental values. When asked about their protest practices, 48% of respondents stated that they boycott hypermarkets and only one fifth of them (21%) said they were not willing to do so. Similarly, 55% of respondents declared to be putting alternative consumption into practice and only 17% did not consider doing so. Verbatims provide deeper insight into these practices. Respondents declaring to practice a form of committed consumption referred most frequently to the self-production of food (22.8%), such as growing one's own vegetables, followed by giving preference to small shops (20.5%), and eating locally-grown produce (8.6%). By contrast, buying organic is relatively rarely mentioned (4%) and many report a lack of means to access these types of products (7.3%).

Arguing that ecological issues are politicized through consumption would be a long shot, since the question is not usually put in these terms. However, these initial indicators corroborate that working-class groups develop specific responses to environmental problems. Faced with dispossession on these issues (Comby, 2015) and feeling distanced from the dominant label of "eco-citizen", these groups are reinterpreting what environmentalism means and re-anchoring it in their daily and local practices.

This includes, in the case of the YVs, building inclusive local spatialities, reinventing conviviality and dwelling places, caring for the capabilities of other-than-human life forms,

or using resources sparingly. The YVs movement offers fresh insights on areas traditionally little affected by social movements and on territories deserted by public services and social science research. Near a road interchange, on a roundabout or in an out-of-town retail park, only accessible by car, "non-places" (Augé, 2015) are somewhat rehabilitated as places of dwelling and citizenship, and as valuable material resources. Practices that could be qualified as low-key, such as building sheds, keeping warm around a campfire, and above all sharing food (Chiron, 2021; Clément, 2020) reveal concrete solidarities and interdependencies.

Qualitative research on the YV movement published to date focuses specifically on the moral economy of care, respect, usefulness to the community (Gaillard, 2021; Hazard, 2020), conviviality (Bernard de Raymond & Bordiec, 2020). Some are more focused on working-class ecological cultures anchored in the experience of standing in the margins (Faburel et al., 2021), and autonomously providing for one's own essential needs (Elalaoui, thesis in progress). All studies exploring these aspects tend to connect precarious living conditions with the desire to preserve one's surroundings, including through the attention to diverse forms of life (Gaillard, 2021). For instance, YVs' shacks (or sheds) are resilient material structures designed to afford protection both from bad weather and from intentional destruction, and to be easily rebuilt – while subverting the functions of roundabouts (Doulin-Dimopoulos, Koerner and Siffert, 2021; Faburel, 2021). P. Chiron (2021) insists on the possession of vegetable gardens to foster YV-group solidarity in Wouth-Western France. Such gardens act as a form of roundabout substitute. YVs value them highly and presented them at regional and national coordination events as an inspiring experience. As the author writes, "commensality becomes the medium of the commitment" anchored in shared food production activities. This engagement actively transforms consumption practices and concords with a shared moral economy, where the attentive preservation of local surroundings primes over more abstract environmental issues.

Research results reviewed in this section comfort the conception of the YVs movement as a moment of reinterpretation of what environmentalism means, both from a descriptive and analytical point of view. Often distant from dominant "eco-citizenship" narratives, YVs have been - and still are in some places- also active protagonists of local environmental struggles, have initiated alternative ways of dwelling in damaged environments, in a fragile but concrete quest for a moral economy of care that echoes, in many circumstances, contemporary environmental ethics.

Conclusion

While its long-term consequences on the French political system remain to be seen (Grossman, 2019), the Yellow Vests movement has represented a major focusing event, putting issues like environmental protection, social justice and democracy to the forefront of the agenda. Initially, the YVs were portrayed as an ideal-typical resistance against climate policies and taxation, deriving from basic anti-environmentalism. This article shows that the reality is more complex and that YVs have opened new avenues to reflect on the intertwinement between the environment, inequalities and the quality of democracy.

The YV uprising was associated with a radical mistrust towards governmental action and intentions, expanding to climate policies and instruments. YVs are admittedly distant from institutionalized environmentalism: large surveys achieved among YVs provide strong evidence of low support for green parties, environmentalist organizations and political figures. This is in line with results on the political sociology of environmentalism, which demonstrates the prevalence of urban, young, educated profiles among environmental activists. These categories are underrepresented among the YVs. However, the low salience

of environmental concerns to YVs suggests that anti-environmentalism is not a driving force of this mobilization: YVs are as divided about environmental issues as the rest of the French population.

While YVs' discourses and practices reveal core concerns with purchasing power, social justice and democracy, their mobilization is far from incompatible with environmental concerns. A significant segment of the movement already adheres to environmental values and repeated interactions have taken place locally with environmentalist mobilizations. Furthermore, the YV mobilization shows the relevance of emerging approaches to working-class environmentalism: they display practices that de facto preserve the environment without it being necessarily politicized. Our review hence sheds light on the pervasive and heterogeneous places where environmental issues and "end of the month" concerns can meet.

These results offer two promising venues for future research. First, it can lead scholars to rethink the link between some of the main structural conflicts in West European political systems. YVs show that the class cleavage, which has been considered in decline since the early 1990s (Franklin, 1992; Elff, 2007), can take new forms and is now anything but independent from other cleavages related to the environment (Persico, 2014) or to the democratic nature of West European polities (Abrial et al., 2022). Just like concerns about economic inequalities have now become central within the climate movement (Alexandre et al., 2021), the salience of the ecological crisis and the redistributive nature of environmental policies have played a significant role in the mobilization of underprivileged citizens. "End of the month" issues are less and less distinguishable from "end of the world" ones.

Moreover, the *de facto* environmentalism that has expressed itself in the course of the movement can help us think about how climate policies can become more efficient, fair and desirable. In a sense, YVs and their direct aftermath - the large participatory forum *Grand*

Débat and the citizen assembly *Convention citoyenne pour le Climat* – have transformed the nature of the climate debate in France. They have broadened the support for policies centered on sobriety, as opposed to growth-maximizing technocratic and technological fixes. Shifting the debate back to issues of sobriety, conviviality and community organizing might not only lead to reconsider poorer citizens' way of life – beyond the fact that it is more sustainable than the riches', however eco-friendly they might be (Pottier, 2020). It might also bring scholars and policy-makers back to some of the founding ideals of the ecologist movement: how to make sobriety and simplicity desirable? How to break the vicious circle of conspicuous consumption? How can fiscal, social and environmental policies be thought together? The YVs have offered some preliminary answers to these questions, without even asking them.

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