

Unrepresentative Claims: Speaking for Oneself in a Social Movement

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Sometimes, people engaged in politics actively refuse to speak for anyone but themselves. These unrepresentative claims multiply in social movements in times of crisis. During the French Yellow Vest movement of 2018–2019, such unrepresentative claims were routinely made by Yellow Vest leaders, to the point of being a condition for having a leadership position in the movement. By making these unrepresentative claims, they declined any representative mandate, asserting their freedom from any instituted influence. However, by claiming to speak only for themselves, they also selected the aspects of their identity they performed. This allowed them to embody the people sharing this identity, recalling the medieval *repraesentatio identitatis*, but in a way adjusted to today's greater personalization of politics. Drawing on this movement and on other examples of unrepresentative claims, we can delineate three broad ideal-types of identities that may be put forward by unrepresentative claims: generality, particularity, and individuality.

In some situations, people who intend to carry a political action—that is, to affect collective outcomes, actively refuse to be seen as speaking for anyone but themselves. Not only do they not make any representative claim; they refute any possible characterization as representatives by making what might be called *unrepresentative claims*. While they may seem to constitute a minor and borderline case in politics, I contend that these claims shed an important light on the concept of representation by showing that speaking for a group may impede one's ability to speak as an authentic member of the said group and thus to *embody* it. Indeed, these claims are rarely even considered in studies of political representation because they are at odds with both the history of representative governments and the most recent developments of the political theory of representation.

From a historical point of view, since the English, French, and American revolutions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, representative governments have progressively become hegemonic in the Global North and then in many countries of the Global South, to the point of constituting the only publicly defensible normative horizon after the fall of the Soviet Union (Fukuyama 1992). While representative governments leave room for the expression of public judgements and deliberation, political power is usually monopolized by elected representatives (Manin 1997). The development of mass political parties in the twentieth century helped to reconcile the (democratic) direct participation of citizens with the (oligarchic) professionalization of representation, weakening the republican and

democratic critique of representation (Urbinati 2011). The framework of representative government has become so effective and pervasive that most organizations wanting to gain political momentum use the procedures and vocabulary of representation, from trade unions to NGOs, from the local to the transnational scale (Louis and Ruwet 2017; Steffek and Hahn 2010). Since the middle of the twentieth century, even authoritarian regimes have adopted at least the trappings of representative government, such as setting up mechanisms of systemic responsiveness (Duan 2019; Truex 2016). In a few centuries, the institutions of representative government, first and foremost the electoral mandate, went from having a minor role in some parts of Western Europe (Hayat, Péneau, and Sintomer 2020) to being the common political language of humankind. In these conditions, refusing to represent may seem to go against one of the best established long-term political trends.

When one considers contemporary political theory, this hegemony of political representation may seem even greater, with the current widening of the number of political phenomena characterized as representation (Brito Vieira 2017; Castiglione and Pollak 2019; Disch, Sande, and Urbinati 2019; Urbinati and Warren 2008). Indeed, much of the discussion on political representation has been focused lately on the “constructivist turn” initiated, at least in Anglo-American political theory, by Michael Saward's famous conceptualization of “representative claims” (Saward 2006; 2010)—and by other endeavors going in the same direction (Rehfeld 2006). Saward makes an argument that is both simple and compelling: representation is fundamentally an activity of claim-making in which a *maker* presents an *audience* with a relation between a *subject* and an *object*—the latter being constructed by selecting elements from an existing *referent* (Saward 2006, 302).

This grammar of representative claims unifies two meanings of representation that were historically

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distinct (Sintomer 2013): on the one hand, mandate representation, in which the representative is authorized by the represented, often to defend their interest—an idea best captured by the German word *Vertretung* and, on the other hand, representation as embodiment, identified by the conceptual historian Hasso Hofmann as *repraesentatio identitatis* (Hofmann 1973), a medieval term used to designate situations in which a representative (often an assembly) could *stand for* an entity (a *universitas*, or corporation) without any mandate, simply by speaking as *pars pro toto*, a part for the whole—better corresponding to the initial meaning of the German word *Repräsentation* (Hayat, Péneau, and Sintomer 2018). While mandate representation in this sense has been hegemonic since the triumph of representative government, to the point of making some authors consider all forms of representation not based on authorization to be nonpolitical (Schweber 2016), the constructivist turn in the theory of political representation has expanded the world of representation to include claims that may sometimes be related to embodiment more than to mandate, such as those made by unauthorized or informal representatives (Montanaro 2012; Salkin 2018; Saward 2008). In Saward's perspective, contrary to the classic assumptions of Hanna Pitkin's masterwork (Pitkin 1972), political representation does not require electoral authorization or any substantive or descriptive relation between a representative and its constituents. The performative activity of claim-making is in itself the medium of representation. For Saward, and for many of his commentators, it follows that representation can be found everywhere in the social world, not solely in the political field strictly understood.¹

Unrepresentative claims challenge the hegemony of representation as the major or even unique source of

political power and the generality of the grammar of representative claims. My hypothesis is that these claims multiply and thrive in historical periods marked by the crisis of representative government and the expansion of popular protest. In these configurations, some social movements develop a rhetoric that rejects all forms of political representation and defends the power of the people. The problem is that in order to exist as social movements, they must speak as the people and therefore make claims to represent them. The popular upheavals of the 2010s were cases in point: protesters claimed that elected representatives did not represent the people—“¡Que no nos representan!” shouted the Spanish crowds during the 2011 15M movement—and offered a “counter-representation” (Brito Vieira 2015), such as the famous motto “We are the 99 percent.” Many works have discussed these movements' combination of a radical critique of (constituted) mandate representation and strong claims to collectively embody the (constituent) people (Brito Vieira 2015; Caraus 2017; de Barros 2020; Gerbaudo 2017; Prentoulis and Thomassen 2013; 2014; Sande 2020; Tormey 2015; Tufekci 2017; Wessel 2013). In these movements, “self-authorized representatives” constitute the people in whose name they speak through representative claims; for example, in the motto “We are the 99 percent,” “We” stands for the “the imagined possibility of a democratic people empowered to name and confront a wrong that Occupy is already enacting” (Brito Vieira 2015, 506). In this sense, there is a strong resemblance between these popular movements and the (paradoxical) logics of constituent moments, during which “the self-constitution of political community” is enabled by the “performative circularity” of a representative claim creating the very political community that authorizes the representative to speak in the name of that community (Lindahl 2007).

However, there is an important difference, which has been overlooked and is integral to the distinctiveness of these popular movements: unlike in constituent moments, the rejection of representation also affects the potential leaders of these movements, who are in constant danger of being rejected by the protesters if they claim to speak for them.² These movements bring together ordinary citizens, the governed, the represented—by the nature of their construction, they cannot include representatives. And yet, like any collective entity, these movements need spokespersons to exist, especially in the media. My contention is that this contradiction forces aspiring leaders to show that they too are mere citizens by staging their refusal to represent anyone but themselves. Only by making unrepresentative claims can these “self-denying” (de Barros 2020) leaders paradoxically be recognized as

¹ This extensive understanding of Saward's representative claim, where every political statement or even any symbolic act, linguistic or not, relating different elements of the world, is said to be a representative claim, may be set in contrast with more limited conceptions of representative claims in which someone actually needs to make an explicit claim for representation to occur. In 2020, Thomás Zicman de Barros, discussing several popular upheavals, asserted that their political claims may have been representative in the aesthetic sense of *Darstellung*, but not necessarily of *Vertretung*, delegation, or mandate (de Barros 2020)—only to be strongly criticized by Lasse Thomassen, who in a more radically constructivist vein stated that claims about objects of representation always implicated a subject, thus a form of *Vertretung* (Thomassen 2021). This dichotomy has to be linked with another important one made by several scholars between radical and moderate constructivism (Fossen 2019; Hayat 2019; Mulieri 2019). According to the radical version of Saward's constructivism, political or even social reality is entirely constructed by these claims: the structure of reality is only defined by the contingent success of the claims. In the moderate version, on the contrary, social reality preexists any claim, so the structure of the referent actually matters when it comes to the success or failure of the claims. This should be related with Pierre Bourdieu's critique of the Marxian conception of social classes: Bourdieu advocated against Marx for a radical constructivism by refuting the idea that classes exist as economic realities before they are represented (Bourdieu 1991b). For a radical understanding of representative claims see (Decreus 2013). Also see (Thomassen 2017) for a discussion on representation and poststructuralism.

² In this sense, unrepresentative claims may be said to mirror—and are sometimes intertwined with—what Wendy Salkin has called “conscripted” representatives, informal political representatives who “are taken by some audience to speak or act for some group, but do not take themselves to speak or act for that group—that is, the party is unwitting or unwilling” (Salkin 2021, 15).

spokespersons both by participants in these movements and by outside audiences.

This strategy was particularly visible in the protest that opened the last wave of the 2010s popular uprisings: the French Yellow Vest movement, the *Gilets Jaunes*. This movement was initiated at a time when the French political system was facing a major crisis, with the election of Emmanuel Macron against established political parties and traditional divisions, including the left–right dichotomy (Cautrès and Muxel 2019; Dolez, Frérel, and Lefebvre 2019; Perrineau 2017). This election both revealed and accelerated the profound defiance shared by French citizens against professional political representatives, who were trusted by only a small percentage of the population.³ Yet a year after Macron's election, he faced a large, multifaceted popular protest, the Yellow Vest movement, unified by a call for social and fiscal justice and a critique of the oligarchic tendencies of the French representative government (Confavreux 2019; Jeanpierre 2019). This movement rapidly gathered strong momentum across the country, with thousands of occupied roundabouts and weekly demonstrations. The Yellow Vests mounted a radical critique of all institutions (political parties, but also trade unions and the press). But more importantly, they also refused to designate representatives of the movement itself: as the political scientist Christian Le Bart phrases it, “the refusal of verticality challenged all forms of leadership, representation or even simply delegation to a spokesperson” (Le Bart 2020, 99). The anthropologist Serena Boncompagni observed a similar “principle of horizontality” on the roundabouts she studied: “Yellow Vests were busy questioning—almost systematically—the propensity of some to organize and represent others,” making it “extremely dangerous for all who risked taking on responsibilities, particularly that of spokespersonship” (Boncompagni 2021). Indeed, during this movement, not only local leaders but also prominent Yellow Vest figures articulated a radical critique of representation and a claim that the Yellow Vests *were* the people with multiple unrepresentative claims in which they claimed to speak *only for themselves*.

In this paper, I will try to make sense of these unrepresentative claims, by showing how Yellow Vest leaders make these claims to assert freedom from any mandate, and thence authentic belonging to the people—constructed as those who represent no one but themselves. But these claims are also the occasion for their makers to give public portrayals of themselves, putting forward selected aspects of their identity. This example then informs us more generally about the reason unrepresentative claims may empower their maker: they give credit to their claims to speak *as* something (a citizen, the member of a social group, a singular individual) by staging their refusal to speak *for* anyone, a form of

embodiment that is particularly empowering in situations in which authenticity matters more than authorization.

First, this paper will start with a presentation of some unrepresentative claims made by Yellow Vest leaders. I will then discuss how these unrepresentative claims fit into the broader category of negative claims or claims of misrepresentation, allowing their makers to appear as unattached members of the people speaking only for themselves. In a third section, I will show that these negative unrepresentative claims go with an implicit positive representative claim through which unrepresentative claim-makers offer portrayals of themselves to the audiences of their claim, opening the possibility for them to embody these identities. Finally, I will delineate three ideal-types of unattached identities embodied through unrepresentative claims.

THE UNREPRESENTATIVE CLAIMS OF THE YELLOW VESTS

The French Yellow Vest movement started in November 2018 to protest against taxes on gas, but it soon expanded into a more general protest, quite unprecedented in its scope, longevity, diversity, popular support—and in the violence of the repression protestors had to face. Among the movement, the refusal of representation was prominent, both against Yellow Vests attempting to speak for the movement and against institutionalized representatives, be they professional politicians, journalists or trade-union leaders (Dardot and Laval 2018; Lefebvre 2019). This attitude toward representation was put to the test several times. As it happened, there was an election to the European Parliament in May 2020, and during the campaign not only did party candidates court the Yellow Vests but several figures of the Yellow Vests themselves stood in the election. There even were two lists that claimed to represent the movement: *Alliance Jaune*, led by the singer Francis Lalanne, and *Évolution Citoyenne*. They both utterly failed to take advantage of the popularity of the movement, obtaining respectively 0.54% and 0.01% of the votes. Other attempts were met with strong resistance from Yellow Vests, such as the short-lived candidacy of Ingrid Levavasseur, a nursing assistant and one of the movement's early prominent figures. After Levavasseur created a party, the *Ralliement d'Initiative Citoyenne*—a direct reference to the “Référéndum d'initiative citoyenne,” meaning citizens' initiative, which from December 2018 became the main demand of the movement—and declared her intention to run for European deputy, she became the target of a large and violent campaign from Yellow Vests, leading her to give up and withdraw from the movement. The most radical speech against representation was given by a group of Yellow Vests from a small town in the east of France, Commercy. On November 30, 2018, they launched a call to popular assemblies on YouTube, through a formal declaration read in turn by several Yellow Vests, directed against the government that had recently expressed the wish to

³ Trust in political institutions is measured annually in France by the “Baromètre de la confiance politique,” a political trust barometer established by the Sciences Po Center for Political Research (CEVIPOF).

discuss with representatives of the movement⁴ and, more importantly, against the possible Yellow Vest leaders who would accept. They stated that

We do not want “representatives” who would end up talking for us! (...) If we appoint “representatives” and “spokespersons”, it will eventually make us passive. Worse: we will quickly reproduce the system and act from top down like the scoundrels who rule us. These so-called “representatives of the people” who are filling their pockets, who make laws that rot our lives and serve the interests of the ultra-rich! Let’s not get ensnared in representation and political maneuvering. This is not the time to hand over our voice to a handful of people, even if they seem honest. They must listen to all of us or to no one! (...) We will not let ourselves be ruled. We will not let ourselves be divided and bought off. No to self-proclaimed representatives and spokespersons! Let’s take back the power over our lives! Long live the yellow vests in their diversity! LONG LIVE THE POWER OF THE PEOPLE, BY THE PEOPLE, FOR THE PEOPLE!⁵

This kind of declaration was not commonplace at this stage of the movement, but it resonated with a much more widespread critique of representation among Yellow Vests.

Yet, despite all this refusal of representation, leaders emerged. But those who did and managed to stay seemed to be the ones who were the more likely to make unrepresentative claims. One particular Yellow Vest leader, the commercial executive Benjamin Cauchy, who decided to run for European deputy on a right-wing *souverainiste* list, thus declared “*Je ne représente que moi-même*” (“I do not represent anyone but myself”). Far from being an isolated case, the phrase “I do not represent” or other similar ones were repeatedly pronounced by many Yellow Vest leaders in different situations. Another early Yellow Vest leader, the hypnotherapist Jacline Mouraud, created her own political party in April 2019, but as a guest on a radio show, she claimed: “I represent only myself.”⁶ A group of Yellow Vests started a meeting in December 2018 saying, “We are apolitical. We do not represent the *Gilets Jaunes*.”⁷ In February, the truck-driver Eric

Drouet, one of the two individuals who started the movement, claimed to have “no organizing or leading role in this movement” but to be a mere “mediator” (*relais*).⁸ The other initiator, Priscillia Ludosky, recognized that “some people have the need for representation” but insisted that “among the ‘figures’, as they say, there is not this need (...). I do not have the responsibility to speak in the name of someone in particular.”⁹ In the early days of the movement, a list of eight spokespersons emerged, selected mostly by cooptation. They called themselves “official communicators” (*communicants officiels*), a term that had never been used in a French social movement until then, and insisted they were “not leaders or decision-makers, but messengers.”¹⁰ After two of them, Drouet and Ludosky, met the Minister of Ecology, they refused any further negotiation, insisting that all future encounters with officials should be broadcasted live, and the group was dissolved.¹¹ As Eric Drouet then explained, “there can be no representative for the movement, it is the whole of the *Gilets Jaunes* that must speak.”¹² Other occurrences may be found in the discourse of all prominent figures of the movement. They did not even try to use the legitimization provided by charisma, as they often pretended to be figures just by chance, easily replaceable by any other activist. These strange unrepresentative claims were much better accepted by Yellow Vests than the more usual representative claims made by Levavasseur and others. The rhetoric of unrepresentative claims was paradoxically common among Yellow Vest leaders who managed to remain in charge—as if it was a necessity to make an unrepresentative claim to remain a representative of the Yellow Vests.¹³

⁸ Aline Leclerc. “‘Gilets Jaunes’: ces leaders qui refusent de l’être.” *Le Monde*, March 20, 2019. https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2019/03/30/gilets-jaunes-ces-leaders-qui-refusent-de-l-etre_5443432_3224.html.

⁹ Antoine Cargoet. “Priscillia Ludosky: ‘Les Gilets Jaunes ont mis un coup de pied dans la fourmière.’” *Le Vent se lève*, April 10, 2019. <https://lvsl.fr/priscillia-ludosky-les-gilets-jaunes-ont-mis-un-coup-de-pied-dans-la-fourmiere/>

¹⁰ “Les ‘Gilets Jaunes’ désignent leurs porte-parole.” *Le Monde*, November 26, 2018. https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2018/11/26/les-gilets-jaunes-designent-leurs-porte-parole_5388853_3224.html

¹¹ They were then contested by another group of six self-proclaimed spokespersons, “The Free Yellow Vests,” that included Benjamin Cauchy, an initial member of the eight communicators who was set aside because of his links with the right, and met with the Prime Minister—but the group dissolved immediately after that.

¹² “Gilets Jaunes: deux des huit porte-parole officiels sont franciliens.” *France Bleu*, November 26, 2018. <https://www.francebleu.fr/infos/societe/gilets-jaunes-deux-des-huit-porte-parole-officiels-sont-franciliens-1543241669>.

¹³ An exception was the Rouen lawyer François Boulo, who tried to be given a mandate through a popular vote on the Internet. While he failed, it does not seem he was attacked for his representative claim. One reason he attempted to play the game of mandate representation may be that he was a lawyer, who presented himself from the beginning as an advocate of the Yellow Vests, more than a Yellow Vest himself, even if he wore the iconic clothing item—a position similar to that adopted by another lawyer who defended the movement in the media, through books, and in court, Juan Branco.

⁴ A similar move had been made in Turkey during the Gezi protests: the government invited a group of personalities, including TV stars, to represent the protests and then later a group of activists. As Zeynep Tufekci comments, “by not choosing its own leaders and representatives, the Gezi movement yielded power to the government, allowing it to usurp the choice of negotiators” (Tufekci 2017, 72).

⁵ L’Appel des Gilets Jaunes de Commercy à des assemblées populaires partout en France ! November 30, 2018. <https://youtu.be/dFLIYpJHir4>.

⁶ “Le Petit-Déjeuner politique.” *Sud Radio*, April 8, 2019. <https://youtu.be/hd9Eb92DrBw>.

⁷ “Une réunion de Gilets Jaunes avec des politiques de Haute-Vienne écourtée après des violences ... avec d’autres Gilets jaunes.” *Le Populaire du Centre*, December 11, 2018. https://www.lepopulaire.fr/limoges-87000/actualites/une-reunion-de-gilets-jaunes-avec-des-politiques-de-haute-vienne-ecourtee-apres-des-violences-avec-d-autres-gilets-jaunes_13080099/.

UNREPRESENTATIVE CLAIMS AS NEGATIVE CLAIMS

In order to make sense of these unrepresentative claims, we can reformulate them using Saward's grammar of representative claims. When someone claims to speak only for herself, she makes a *negative* representative claim, stating that she, as a subject, does *not* stand for anyone else. This negative claim functions as a "claim of misrepresentation" (Guasti and Rezende de Almeida 2019) in which a maker puts forward a subject which is said *not* to stand for an object that is related to a referent and is offered to an audience, with two differences. First, claims of misrepresentation generally imply that there *is* misrepresentation where there *should be* representation, and the point of the claim—even if it is purely rhetoric—is to repair this flawed relation of representation or to replace it with a better one. On the contrary, when a Yellow Vest leader claims to speak only for herself, she is not "challenging the legitimacy and authority" (Guasti and Rezende de Almeida 2019, 154) of a representative but acting as though speaking for anyone but herself would undermine her position. Second, while claims of misrepresentation are usually "counterclaims" (Saward 2010, 36–7) that target specific representative claims, the negative claim implied by the sentence "I speak only for myself" is general: it targets any possible relation of representation—that is, any possible representative claim that could have the maker of the unrepresentative claim as its subject. These unrepresentative claims thus attempt to present their maker as fundamentally unattached.

To understand why someone may want to appear *unattached*, one has to understand why people might presume that someone is *attached* and what it means, which in turn assumes taking into account what institutions are. In the constructivist perspective developed by John Searle, "institutional facts" are created through the attribution of "status functions" to persons or objects that acquire "deontic powers" through "declarations" (speech acts) that are collectively accepted (Searle 2011). Expanding on Searle's framework, the pragmatist sociologist Luc Boltanski states that "an institution is a bodiless being to which is delegated the task of stating the whatness of what is" (Boltanski 2011, 74)—that is, to maintain the integrity of social reality. The problem is that in order to exist, as bodiless beings, institutions have to be embodied by spokespersons authorized to make declarations on their behalf. This ontological need for institutions to be embodied thus leads to a constant suspicion that their spokespersons do not adequately fulfill this task (Latour 2003). Our social world is constructed as such as every institution needs spokespersons, and behind every spokesperson there is a human being, with her own passions, interests, and needs, which she can sometimes put before the interests of the institution she represents.

For Boltanski, this "hermeneutic contradiction" caused by the necessary delegation of the institutions' deontic power to spokespersons is at the core of the

possibility of social critique (Blokker 2014). Indeed, to rephrase this in our framework, it allows for claims of misrepresentation to be made in which citizens (makers) refute that instituted spokespersons (subjects) stand for the institution (object) they are claimed to represent but instead represent only themselves. These claims of misrepresentation were ubiquitous in the Yellow Vest movement, and more generally in the 2010s popular upheavals that rejected representatives as defending only their own interests, or the interest of the rich, using a rhetoric that may be linked with Rousseau's defense of popular sovereignty (Brito Vieira 2015). However, this radical critique of instituted representation does not entirely explain the presence of unrepresentative claims; on the contrary, it is often combined with a claim made by the movement to be self-authorized representatives of the sovereign people. In order to assess for the presence of unrepresentative claims, and not just claims of misrepresentation, we have to take into account the opposite suspicion, overlooked by Boltanski, that is born from the hermeneutic contradiction: that behind every living person that speaks in the social world, there may be an institution acting. In Searle's account, there are good reasons to dismiss these cases as impossible, as institutions precisely rely on collective recognition. But once you introduce the suspicion that persons speaking for institutions actually speak for themselves, you may consider the reverse possibility, that some institutions act through people who speak for them *without claiming that they do*. This suspicion is at the core of every conspiracy theory, according to which some persons, especially those entrusted with public positions, have a secret agenda, which is not to defend their own personal interest (the basic critique related to the hermeneutic contradiction) but to actually speak for an (often hidden) institution (Fenster 1999). This suspicion proceeds from the same uneasiness described by Boltanski facing social reality: we do not know what lies behind the speech of other humans and we often have to make inquiries about them to stabilize our conception of social reality—a situation linked by Boltanski with the general destabilization of societies by capitalism since the end of the nineteenth century, which led to the emergence of detective novels, sociology, conspiracy theories, and clinical paranoia (Boltanski 2014).¹⁴

In that sense, unrepresentative claims may be made to assert that when someone speaks, there is no

¹⁴ Thus, during the Yellow Vest movement, there were many inquiries by journalists, scholars, and more importantly Yellow Vests themselves, to verify that Yellow Vest figures had no prior political involvement and were real newcomers in politics. Any suspicion of a political or syndicalist background led to critiques and often eviction from the movement—by recognized leaders, demonstrators, journalists who stopped inviting them, and so on. See for example this paper by the reference French newspaper uncovering the "activist networks" behind the movement: Adrien Sénécat, "Derrière la percée des 'Gilets Jaunes,' des réseaux pas si 'spontanés' et 'apolitiques.'" *Le Monde*, April 17, 2019. https://www.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs/article/2019/04/17/derriere-la-percee-des-gilets-jaunes-des-reseaux-pas-si-spontanés-et-apolitiques_5451242_4355770.html.

institution speaking through her voice, and thus her speech is *authentically hers*. What she says may be directly attributed to her, not to any “bodiless being” that would speak through her voice. This is why unrepresentative claims were so important in the Yellow Vests movement: the popularity of the movement, its nonpartisan aspect, and its apparent initial disorganization led to a real eagerness to appropriate it from political parties, trade unions, associations, and so on. Members of the movement were faced with a double bind: for the movement to grow, they had to accept any person of good will, but they also had to resist partisan appropriation, especially from their spokespersons, and thus they had to make sure those who spoke as Yellow Vests did not actually represent something else. As a Yellow Vest interviewed during a demonstration explained when asked who was welcome in the movement,

We said no party, no trade union, no official media (...), no association with political connotation, no Left, no Right, OK? You only have a right to come with the French flag or regional flags. (...) There is no reason to have foreign flags, or political flags like NPA [a Trotskyist party] or trade unions, they have no place here—the flags, beware, because as individuals, on the contrary (...). Everyone has the right to come, but with no flag.¹⁵

Protesters of all kinds were welcome—but only if they accepted to appear and to speak only for themselves, not for organizations.¹⁶ On the part of the movement’s spokespersons, these negative claims also allowed them to distance themselves from the world of representatives, often seen as a small elite out of touch with reality, defending its own interest and ultimately corrupt—antiestablishment imagery often used by populist leaders and defenders of conspiracy theories (Barr 2009) but also present in social movements such as the Yellow Vests. In these situations, making unrepresentative claims is a way to prove one does not belong to the establishment but to the much larger group of people who have no mandate, no institution behind them—that is, mere citizens.

This had an important consequence on the relations between leaders and other Yellow Vests: because they did not claim to represent anyone but themselves, they were not accountable to the rest of the movement. For example, when asked why he intended to participate in

the summer camp of *La France insoumise*, a left-wing populist party, the Yellow Vest leader Jérôme Rodrigues answered,

Today the Yellow Vest movement does not wish to have leaders, representatives or even heads, something I agree with, so I am not at all this person, I am part of the movement like anyone, and present since the beginning. As a result, I have no nominative legitimacy that could prevent me from speaking and debating with anyone I want.¹⁷

In this Facebook post, Rodrigues explicitly made an unrepresentative claim, which allowed him to claim at the same time that he belonged to the movement and that he was free from any mandate and accountable to no one. In a political world where being a representative means being accountable to the represented, making unrepresentative claims is a way to declare oneself free from any checks or controls. Aspiring leaders had to prove they were authentic Yellow Vests (wearing the vest, participating in roundabout occupations, going to demonstrations, speaking in a very plain language, etc.), but once they were recognized as such by their audiences, they could and should act as mere individuals *speaking only for themselves*.

SPEAKING FOR ONESELF, EMBODYING AN IDENTITY

The unrepresentative claims of Yellow Vest leaders were negative claims that allowed their makers to deny all possible representative claims that might have related them to an authorizing body, thus asserting their freedom from any mandate and their belonging to the vast majority of people who speak only for themselves. It is solely because they were only unattached individuals that Yellow Vests could together make a “claim of constituency” (Schweber 2016) in the strongest sense—that is, to present themselves as *constituents*, in both meanings: the represented of instituted representatives denounced as a small elite that defends its own interest and the bearers of constituent power. Yet unrepresentative claims, as representative claims, are not mere assessments of a predefined reality: there are *performances*, made in front of *audiences*, that partly produce the reality they perform—here, the self-representation of a subject that represents no object (Hall 1997; Rai and Reinelt 2016; Saward 2017; 2020). Yellow Vest leaders’ unrepresentative claims were made in different situations to convince different audiences (Yellow Vests, the media, political authorities, police officers, judges, and so on) that they were actually speaking only for themselves. The question of whether to consider claims made by protesters who affirm that they speak only for

¹⁵ Radio show *L’histoire en roue libre* #24—*Les Gilets Jaunes en voix et en histoire (Partie 2: Au nom du peuple)*. <https://cause-commune.fm/podcast/histoire-en-roue-libre-24/>.

¹⁶ A parallel may be drawn here with Rousseau’s notion of the general will. According to him, citizens should not be members of “factions” or “partial associations,” because when citizens deliberate, “each of these associations becomes general in relation to its members, while it remains particular in relation to the State” (*Social Contract*, Book II, chap. 3). In order for the “will of all” to approach the “general will,” individuals should not belong to partial associations but participate in deliberations just as unattached individuals. For a discussion of this aspect of Rousseauist thought, see White and Ypi (2016, 42–8).

¹⁷ https://www.facebook.com/lafamillejerome/posts/394166784574811?__tn__=K-R.

themselves as *representative* claims is debated (de Barros 2020; Thomassen 2021). But there is a consensus about the fact that such claims imply representation in the sense that as performative claims, they necessarily participate in the construction, in the mind of audiences, of representations of the object of their claim—here, the very self of the claim-maker. As Mónica Brito Vieira puts it, despite “Occupy’s self-depiction as a post-representational movement,” protesters had to “remain inscribed in a representative paradigm”—showing the “inescapability of representation” (Brito Vieira 2015, 504–6). If we use the distinction between “acting-for-others” and “portraying-something-as-something” (Fossen 2019, 824), unrepresentative claims may well refute any “acting for others,” they still necessarily imply a portrayal of the self.

In this sense, an unrepresentative claim is not solely negative; it always goes together with an implicit, positive representative claim: that I (the maker and subject) speak only for myself (the referent and object)—and thus it participates in constructing this self by performing it. As Linda Alcoff explained in her seminal article about speaking for others, “in speaking for myself, I am also representing myself in a certain way, as occupying a specific subject-position, having certain characteristics and not others, and so on. In speaking for myself, I (momentarily) create my self—just as much as when I speak for others I create their selves—in the sense that I create a public, discursive self” (Alcoff 1991, 10). Two meanings of representation are at play here: even when I deny that I am speaking *for* someone else, I speak *as* someone, thus making a *portrayal* (my self, the object) of the referent of my claim—that is, myself, the person that makes the claim.¹⁸ We see here the importance of the distinction between object and referent:¹⁹ as Thomas Fossen has noted following Nelson Goodman, “when *x* represents *y* as *z*, *y* signifies the referent, and *z* signifies the kind of representation it is” (Fossen 2019, 828)—that is, the object of the representative claim. This distinction is particularly crucial when we are dealing with unrepresentative claims, where the maker, the subject, and the object all have the same referent: the speaking person that makes the claim to speak only for herself. When I make an unrepresentative claim, I picture myself (the referent, the person that speaks) as my *self* (the object, the portrayal my claim makes): neither the referent nor the object is absent. We can now see why unrepresentative claims do not fit well in

the standard model based on Pitkin’s core meaning of representation as “making present *in some sense* of something which is nevertheless *not* present literally or in fact” (Pitkin 1972, 8–9). Constructivist authors have focused their critique on Pitkin’s idea that this absent entity should preexist representation—what Iris Marion Young, following Gilles Deleuze and Jacques Derrida, called the “metaphysics of presence” (Young 2000, 126). According to constructivists, on the contrary, representative claims are performances that construct both the represented and the representative (Disch 2012; 2021; Disch, Sande, and Urbinati 2019; Fossen 2019; Rezende de Almeida 2018). However, unrepresentative claims present a specific challenge to this definition by showing that it is possible to have a representation in the sense of portrayal *without* any absent entity, whether it is considered preexisting or not. When I claim to speak only for myself, to paraphrase Pitkin and underline the inadequacy of her definition for assessing for unrepresentative claims, I make present *in some sense* the self which *is* present literally.

This meaning of representation, in which there is no absent entity, is not entirely new. Quite the contrary: as historians of premodern representation have repeatedly stated, when it entered the political vocabulary toward the end of the Middle Ages, the word *representation* could mean making present something absent but also just performing presence (Chartier 2013; Ginzburg 2001; Marin 2005; Sintomer 2013). In French, to be “*en représentation*” may mean to be on stage, thus making an absent character present, but also to adopt a behavior that would underline (often favorably) certain characteristics of oneself—someone can thus have “*une belle représentation*”—that is, a fine appearance. In that sense, representing only oneself is indeed representation in the sense of underlining certain characteristics of the self—in other words, certain aspects of one’s *identity*. This is much aligned with Erving Goffman’s notion of the presentation of self (Goffman 1956): social interactions may be conceived as theatrical performances in which participants try to influence the mental representations (*Vorstellungen*) others have of them by making representations of themselves (*Darstellungen*). So when someone claims to represent no one but herself, she not only denies the existence of a mandate relation between her and potential constituents; she also means that she speaks *as* someone defined by a given identity, the one she is performing in front of an audience.

Yet there is a gap between the everyday presentations of the self and unrepresentative claims made publicly during a social movement: while both represent the self without reference to an absent object, the former are often implicit, repetitive, and mundane. On the contrary, unrepresentative claims are “*set-piece performances*: specific, designed and contrived acts or events targeted at particular audiences or constituencies, (...) visible, public, and distinctive” (Saward 2017, 78). Unrepresentative claims do not prevent their makers from making portrayals of themselves, quite the contrary: not only are they able to select which

¹⁸ There are actually two conflated meanings in the idea of portrayal, designated by two different words in German (Sintomer 2013): the action of staging myself portraying the object (representation in the sense of *Darstellung*) and the portrayals that appear in the mind of the audience (representation in the sense of *Vorstellung*). The distinction is crucial in German philosophy (Helfer 1996) and may be related to Stuart Hall’s distinction between reflective, intentional, and constructionist theories of representation (Hall 1997).

¹⁹ This distinction has been severely criticized by (Decreus 2013) for being at odds with constructivism, as it presupposes the referent preexists the representative claims. Thomas Fossen accurately defended the referent, “understood as a grammatical function of representational claims, [more] than as the metaphysical substratum of representational objects” (Fossen 2019, 830).

identity is put forward and thus constitutes the object of the claim because they go together with a negative claim; they also may help construct an image of authenticity and genuineness. Unrepresentative claims reinforce (selected) identities, which opens up the possibility for claim makers to *stand for* the community of those who share this identity, *without even having to claim it*. In this sense, they are at the same time negative claims that deny any mandate relation with any object apart from themselves, positive representative claims that portray them by underlining part of their identity and “claims of constituency” (Schweber 2016) that give visibility to groups defined by the said identity—these three claims leading implicitly to a last one: that as simple members of the performed constituency, they may stand for it, using the mechanisms of descriptive representation and the politics of presence (Mansbridge 1999; Phillips 1995; Young 2000).

We recognize here the logics of embodiment, or *repraesentatio identitatis* (Hofmann 1973), in which representatives stand for the group simply because they claim to be part of it. Frank Ankersmit calls this “synecdochical political representation” in which *a* may be said to represent *b* simply because “*a* is part of *b*, as in a *pars pro toto*” (Ankersmit 2019, 236). Representation as embodiment was dominant during the Middle Ages, be it in the Church, in monarchies, in corporations, or in republican city states (Ankersmit 2019; Barat 2017; Faggioli and Melloni 2007; Hayat, Péneau, and Sintomer 2018). Political modernity, with the arrival of representative governments, supposedly rendered this form of representation obsolete. But multiple forms of embodiment have persisted over time, often embroiled with elements of mandate representation. In particular, embodiment has become of paramount importance in giving a presence to social groups, despite the legal triumph of individualism, realized in the political sphere by the principle of “one person, one vote.” Parties, trade unions, and associations could embody groups such as the working class without any formal authorization but according to a logic of “social embodiment” (Rosanvallon 2002, 249)—and thus they would participate in the making of the said group (Bourdieu 1991a).

But whereas embodiment was then carried out by stable, collective, and institutionalized entities, unrepresentative claims involve a very different form of embodiment. Those who claim to speak only for themselves may well offer portrayals of their self, thus constituting the social identities they embody, but they do it as individuals. In this respect, unrepresentative claims are one symptom among others of a wider movement of personalization of politics, characteristic of what Bernard Manin called “audience democracies”—that is, democracies marked by the establishment, through the media, of a direct relation between individualized representatives and their audience (Manin 1997). The personalization of politics, resulting from a complex process involving the media, the institutions, professional politicians, party members, and the voters themselves, challenges the hegemony of political parties, not necessarily by weakening

them but at least by forcing them to adapt, sometimes to innovate, to give more room to individuals at different levels (Cross, Katz, and Pruysers 2018; Gauja 2020; Martigny 2019; Rahat and Kenig 2018). In the French case, Macron pushed personalization to the extreme, by refusing the left–right dichotomy, by creating a movement (not a party) using his initials, by presenting himself (and not the Prime Minister) as the real head of government, and by constantly adopting an informal, noninstitutional attitude.²⁰ However, this personalization of politics concerns not only political parties but also citizens, who may participate in social movements or associations but are less and less willing to become members of stable collective entities such as parties (Biezen and Poguntke 2014). The logic of contentious politics in the digital age mixes collective action with “connective action” in which individuals engage in movements as singular entities whose participation is part of personal narratives shown in digital networks (Bennett and Segerberg 2013). Similarly, unrepresentative claim-makers such as Yellow Vest leaders offer portrayals of themselves to different audiences, and in this sense they embody social identities, but they intend to remain unattached individuals while doing so.

THREE OBJECTS OF UNREPRESENTATIVE CLAIMS

Unrepresentative claims allow their maker to appear at the same time as unattached and as able to exhibit an identity that may form the basis of a relation of embodiment. Which identity may profitably be put forward by a claim-maker is entirely contextual, especially as she can make use of the “shape-shifting” property of representative claims—that is, to shape “strategically his persona and policy positions for certain constituencies and audiences” (Saward 2014, 723). Yet, starting with examples from the Yellow Vest movement, we can establish three ideal-types of objects constructed by unrepresentative claims by distinguishing between three broad categories of identities that may be underlined by a subject making them, without implying a mandate: generality, particularity, and individuality.

Unrepresentative Claims to Embody Generality

First, unrepresentative claims can help the claim-maker assert she has no interest to defend, individual or collective, and is thus entirely impartial, embodying generality. Among Yellow Vest leaders, Priscillia

²⁰ Christian Le Bart makes an interesting analogy with Ernst Kantorowicz’s famous theory of the king’s two bodies: every politician has a first body, physical, personal, and profane, and a second body, official, institutionalized, and sacred. Macron (imitated by many deputies of his party) routinely puts forward his first body to establish his authenticity and distance from the institutions—a strategy that turned against him when the Yellow Vests reduced him to his social class and past as a banker and criticized him for his arrogance (Le Bart 2020, 151–5).

Ludosky was particularly keen on using this strategy. From her initial petition that launched the movement to her launching of the “Citizen Vests” and of the “Real Debate” against Macron’s “Great Debate,” she claimed to embody a position of “citizen-expert,” contrasting her impartiality with the alleged partiality of institutional representatives.²¹ Using unrepresentative claims to establish a position of expertise is not a specificity of the Yellow Vests. Other examples could be found in institutions of international governance, such as multistakeholder processes. A case in point is the *International Organization for Standardization* (ISO), the most important international standard-setting body in the world, based in Geneva. To draft the norm ISO 26000 for social responsibility, issued in 2010, ISO then experimented with an unprecedentedly open process (Hahn and Weidtmann 2016). Different categories of stakeholders were selected, and for each category representative organizations had to nominate experts. But these experts themselves had no mandate, because once selected, they had to express their own perspective, in a deliberative manner, on the discussed matter: “the experts act in a personal capacity and not as the official representative of (...) the organization by which they have been appointed.”²²

In the position of expertise claimed by Ludosky or the experts participating in the ISO 26000 committees, the only legitimacy of their word is that they are experts: they have to claim that they themselves have no stake to hold, no interest to defend, in short that they are not representatives of anything but themselves—in their capacity as experts, be they citizens or scientists. A related situation emerges every time a professional is defined by the generality of the interest or principle she defends, which prevents her from making any other representative claim but gives her a “legitimacy of impartiality” (Rosanvallon 2011).²³ Although the dominant form of generality in politics today is expertise, it

is not necessarily the only form of generality politically acceptable. The ability to give oneself to a cause, to the point of being ready to be hurt or even to die for it, is another aspect of this kind of embodiment, especially when the sacrifice involves the body. In the Yellow Vest movement, some persons acquired a position of leadership through their experience of repression, such as Jérôme Rodrigues who became a prominent figure after he lost an eye to a rubber bullet. With his large beard and his eyepatch, he became a symbol of the Yellow Vests, represented in numerous drawings shared in Facebook groups or sometimes drawn on Vests. The mutilation of his body, combined with the fact that he continued to demonstrate and appear in the media, allowed him to embody the selflessness of the movement. So at the most abstract level, unrepresentative claims may reinforce someone’s claim to speak as someone guided purely by the principle she may embody: science (experts), the cause (martyrs), a discourse (Dryzek and Niemeyer’s discursive representatives; Dryzek and Niemeyer 2008), or the general interest (Rousseau’s Legislator).

Unrepresentative Claims to Embody a Particular Group

At a lower level of generality, making unrepresentative claims may allow someone to embody a collective entity, be it an institution, a group, or a movement. Yellow Vests performed their common belonging to the movement just by wearing the vest; they did not have standardized stickers or posters: they wrote individual slogans directly on their vests, making each individualized and yet made common by the fact they all wore the same vest.²⁴ The vocabulary used by Yellow Vest leaders to be sole messengers for the movement, as was seen above, falls into this category. They claim to be just simple Yellow Vests with no other characteristic, as though they had been selected at random, which enables them to embody the whole movement without any mandate.²⁵ Such unrepresentative claims are quite common among activists, not only Yellow Vests. Sometimes not speaking for others is a powerful constraint in a social movement. The second-wave feminist movement in the USA was a case in point: no one wanted to speak for others, as there was the attempt to forge a participative and inclusive environment (Alcoff 1991; Trebilcot 1988). In the same vein, Black feminist movements, maybe because they were born from a reflection on representation and the silencing of the voices of Black women both in feminist and

²¹ As Christian Le Bart notices, there is an inversion at play here: while traditionally political parties were supposed to be the institution through which particular interests could be reframed in the language of general good, now it seems that parties are seen as guided by partial or caste interests, whereas individuals are spontaneous keepers of the general interest (Le Bart 2020, 80–1).

²² ISO/IEC Directives, Part 1, Edition 12.0 2016-05, p. 17. This can be related to the position of the Burkean trustee (Rehfeld 2009), taken to the extreme. As Pitkin explained, an entirely independent trustee cannot be deemed representative (Pitkin 1972, 162–7). If one considers solely the mode of delegation, characterized by selection (Mansbridge 2009), they could be said to fall under the category of gyroscopic representation (Mansbridge 2003), i.e., representatives that are selected for their personal characteristics (in particular moral values) and then expected to act accordingly to these.

²³ According to Rosanvallon, judges (especially those acting in supreme courts) are more adequately characterized in democracies by a “legitimacy of reflexivity”: they also represent the people by representing the (popular) constituent or legal principles and deliberating on their adequate legal interpretations. See also Ackerman (1993). Rosanvallon’s developments on “the importance of not being elected” in dualist democracies, while not directly addressing the issue of claim-making, back up these remarks. For an empirical approach analyzing representative claims with Rosanvallon’s theory of democratic legitimacy, see Knops and Severs (2019).

²⁴ Although each protester decorated her own vest, some slogans were adopted by many Yellow Vests, such as RIC (referendum by citizens’ initiative) or Frexit (a reference to Brexit). An extensive database of Vests was constituted by the collective “Plein le dos” (an untranslatable pun referring to the Vests being sick to the back teeth and writing it on their backs): <https://pleinledos.org/>.

²⁵ This relationship between sortition, impartiality, and group representation is one of the reasons for the appeal of this procedure. For a first assessment, see Delannoi and Dowlen (2010), López-Rabatel and Sintomer (2019), and Courant and Sintomer (2019).

in Black movements, developed distinctive unrepresentative claims, insisting on the importance for people suffering from oppression of speaking for themselves. In the preface of *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins asked herself, “How can I as one person speak for such a large and complex group as African-American women?” and the answer was a clear unrepresentative claim: “I cannot and should not because each of us must learn to speak for herself,” her book being “on voice in a dialogue among people who have been silenced” (Collins 2002, ix).

This insistence on not speaking for oppressed groups could also be found, although quite differently, in the Occupy movement. As an article from *The Occupied Times* explained in 2011, “We do not ‘speak for’ the poor and oppressed around the world, but we are in solidarity with them.”²⁶ Most certainly, there is a representative claim at work when constituting the “We” of the Occupy movement, and the “We are the 99%” should be understood as a proper representative claim. But inside the movement, unrepresentative claims were constantly made, supporting a strategy of “synecdochal representation” (Sande 2020). As Mathijs van de Sande explains, Occupy activists set up a website on which “thousands of people, mostly from the US, posted pictures of themselves, accompanied by a brief statement that described their individual situation, (...) all undersigned by the slogan ‘I am the 99%. (...)’ It seemed that, in a way, every single personal story could embody or encompass all the others—they all represented the entire 99%” (Sande 2020, 407). It is precisely because they offered a solely personal testimony that they could embody “the 99%,” using the logic of *pars pro toto*. Similarly, in the Notre-Dame-des-Landes “Zone to Defend”—a movement against the construction of an airport in the west of France that started in 2009 and soon became a junction point for the French and European radical Left—every person that was interviewed by the media or spoke publicly presented him- or herself as “Camille.” In all these cases, subjects of unrepresentative claims put forward a specific part of their social identity by underlining the particular institution or group to which they belong while refusing to speak for others.

Unrepresentative Claims to Be Seen as an Unattached Individual

Finally, making an unrepresentative claim may attempt to deny not only any relation of representation but also any form of social belonging in order to be seen simply as an individual. This stance is sometimes taken by “citizen representatives,” a term coined by Mark Warren to emphasize the representative role of citizens in participative and deliberative forums (Warren 2008). In many cases, participants in these are reluctant actively to claim any form of representativeness, social belonging, or expertise: they are just individuals that

agree to give their subjective point of view on a topic—the organizers are those who claim that a given mini-public is representative (Gül 2019). Paradoxically, claiming one’s individuality may help to be considered representative by other claim makers, such as those who set up forums or journalists looking for the take of “real people” on a specific matter. The role of the media should not be downplayed here. Indeed, many Yellow Vests figures emerged because they were available and competent enough to play the role of a Yellow Vest in TV shows, without having any interest to represent, thus being seen as having *authenticity*. In his work on the way the media represented the Yellow Vests, Christian Le Bart showed how journalists and Yellow Vests converged in selecting figures who had no history of activism but could be presented as “mere individuals snatched away from their everyday life by their legitimate anger, [thus] having the grandeur of authenticity” (Le Bart 2020, 39). To demonstrate this authenticity, journalists multiplied individual portraits, “gaining in consistency and substance what they lost in representativeness” (Le Bart 2020, 55). Although they refused to represent the Yellow Vests in the usual sense of political representation, these figures represented them from an aesthetic point of view, as past characters do in historical narratives (Ankersmit 2001; 2002).²⁷ The rise of digital social media platforms deprived magazines, radio, and TV of their monopoly in the construction of narratives in which individuals were select to represent either themselves or a given group. Now “microcelebrity networked activists” can launch a podcast or a YouTube or Twitch channel, or even a mere Twitter account, and defend their point of view, sometimes influencing many people without having to resort to being a character in someone else’s narrative (Tufekci 2013). Yet often this assumes that such figures speak just for themselves, and not for a party or any organization, because authenticity is of paramount importance to establishing oneself as having a singular—and thus worthy—point of view (Gaden and Dumitrica 2015).

CONCLUSION

Unrepresentative claims are political performances of a specific kind. As negative claims, their makers deny speaking for anyone but themselves. But by doing so, they offer portrayals of themselves to their audience, selecting the aspect of their identity they want to put forward, which allows them to embody the persons who

²⁶ “From the Mexican Highlands to St Paul’s.” *The Occupied Times*, November 23, 2011. <https://theoccupiedtimes.org/?p=1054>.

²⁷ According to Pierre Rosanvallon, there may well be a link between the absence of political representation of the lower classes in France and the scarcity of their aesthetic representation in the media, novels, films, and so on. For this reason, in 2014 he launched the book collection “*Raconter la vie*” (Narrating life), a series of portraits of individual people, and a website on which people could share their experience—an approach theorized in a book called “the Parliament of the invisible” (Rosanvallon 2014). And indeed, the Yellow Vest movement was often presented in the media as the revenge or the revolt of the invisible.

share this identity. The ubiquity of unrepresentative claims shows that far from being relics of medieval times, occurrences of representation as embodiment are still part of the rhetoric of multiple agents and institutions. Asserting that one does not hold a mandate may in some cases be mandatory to successfully claim to be seen as impartial, to embody a group, or to see one's subjective experience recognized. More importantly, it shows that not all contemporary forms of embodiment are individualized and linked with authoritarian or populist endeavors—some are collective, actively opposing tendencies to appropriation by leaders. But it also shows that unrepresentative claims, even made in the context of social movements, do not necessarily seek to defend a form of direct democracy. Yellow Vest leaders used the general defiance toward instituted representative democracy, but they did not try to set alternate mechanisms of decision making that would empower protesters. On the contrary, their leadership largely depended on the absence of such mechanisms, which may explain why the most radically democratic attempts born from the movement, such as the four “Assemblies of Assemblies” that took place in 2019 at the initiative of the Commercy roundabout, did not include any of the most prominent Yellow Vest figures. Ultimately, the leaders' unrepresentative claims served their (implicit) representative claims that they were able to embody the movement, without being accountable to its members. Whether these claims have inclusive effects or not depends on how the members of the constituency they create can themselves participate in politics—which sometimes mean contesting the very claims that gave them a voice (Brito Vieira 2020; Disch 2011; Hayat 2018). Still, unrepresentative claims, which are bound to flourish in a political world marked by a crisis of representative democracy, contribute to reshaping the representative system as a whole. Taking them seriously, as parts of this system, may help us understand what kinds of representation exist beyond representative government and what challenges they may raise for the future.

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The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

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