



# From the roundabout to the city center: women's activist careers and socio-spatial division of activist labor in the Yellow Vest movement

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## Abstract

This article follows on from various studies that analyze the internal sociological heterogeneity of social movements and the power relations resulting from it. It focuses on the activist careers of three female activists in the French Yellow Vest movement and shows that the loose, decentralized structure of this movement allows for the emergence of spaces where it is possible, locally and temporarily, to subvert power relations. The demonstration is processual and chronological. We start by analyzing how the social and political background of the three women informed the way they entered the movement and seek what they regard as their rightful place, whether as organizer or as grassroots activist. We then show how the mix of such backgrounds and their first steps in the movements led them to negotiate, stay, or escape from the mobilization sites they frequented.

**Keywords** Social movements · Gender · Activist career · Socio-spatial organization · Yellow Vest movement · Division of activist labor

## Introduction

Fathia, Nathalie and Émilie<sup>1</sup> are three women we met during our investigation of the Yellow Vest (YV) movement in the Lyon metropolitan area<sup>2</sup>. All three come from working-class backgrounds, have no family to support, and have

<sup>1</sup> All the protagonists' names have been changed.

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been involved in the movement since November 2018, having devoted most of their time to it for several consecutive weeks. They crossed paths, frequented the same sites of mobilization for a time and sometimes took part in the same actions. But, looked at more closely, it can be seen that they have not devoted the same amount of activist time to the same places, nor frequented the same networks of sociability, nor privileged the same modes of action. In the course of their engagement, they have thus contributed to the emergence of different poles of mobilization, in this case mainly structured around roundabouts in the working-class suburb of Lyon and the general assemblies in the city center of the metropolitan area. Here as elsewhere, the YV movement has thus been characterized by the existence of multiple mobilization sites which provide so many different frameworks of engagement for the activists. Although it is considered a central feature of the movement as a whole (Blavier and Walker 2020) and produces several types of power relations (Devaux et al. 2019), this socio-spatial dispersal of the movement is often regarded as a fact whose logics and construction are not questioned. We aim here to examine these socio-spatial dynamics by articulating the microlevel of activist trajectories with the mesolevel of the organizational shaping of activism (Sawicki and Siméant 2009). To do so, we propose to draw on the literature on the socio-spatial division of collective mobilizations, the gendered character of the division of activist labor, and the construction of the activist career.

For a long time, space was neglected by the sociology of collective action, but it is now the object of renewed attention (Combes et al. 2016; Hmed 2009; Jessop et al. 2008; Mathieu 2011). Space, understood at once as the framework of social actions, as the matrix of an unequal distribution of resources (Tissot and Poupeau 2005), or of repertoires and strategies of resistance (Ripoll 2008), plays a role at several levels in collective mobilizations. While the existing literature on social movements has mainly focused on certain sub-spaces of mobilization examined independently, we seek to grasp the plurality of mobilization sites within a specific movement by analyzing these sites in a relational way.

These socio-spatial configurations cannot be reduced to a set (even an interdependent one) of places structured by different organizational logics. On the contrary, there is a need to understand how organizational logics are articulated with the ordinary social relations of the groups of actors who frequent them. This is how the literature on social movements has grasped the mechanisms of division and a hierarchization of the activist labor required for the existence and maintenance of a mobilization (Dunezat 2009; Nicourd 2020). Building on Taylor's seminal work on self-help and the gendered character of social movements (Taylor 1999), some authors have shown that the differentiation and hierarchization of the tasks specific to activist labor are set in an intersectional order of gender and class that tends to be established to the disadvantage of women and the working classes (Avanza 2020; Bargel 2005; Challier 2021), while sometimes producing reversals or subversions of



these logics of domination, depending on the configuration in which they are embedded (Achin and Naudier 2013; Cardi and Pruvost 2012; Chevalier 2012; Badran 2019).

While it is true that the movement is mostly composed of demonstrators from the working or lower middle classes, quantitative surveys on the movement have been able to highlight the internal diversity of these categories, particularly from a socio-occupational perspective (Blavier 2021), as shown by the cases of Fathia, Nathalie and Émilie. We argue that this internal stratification of working-class categories has an impact on activist trajectories within the YV movement. The question of women's place in the YV movement was an important issue in the press very early on, underlining the strong presence and emergence of female figures aiming at representing the other activists. A historical perspective nevertheless recalls that the presence of women in social movements is far from new. As some work shows, the originality of this movement is more connected to the fact that women are in some ways more visible here than in other social conflicts (Gallot 2019). Such analyses of the YV mobilization emphasize the claims and the repertoires of action carried specifically by women that reinforce this visibility, and in a way inform the possibility of a social movement to promote the "cause of women" (Bereni 2012), although taken as a group and not necessarily considered in their diversity.

Analysis of the intertwining of the socio-spatial dynamics and the divisions of activist labor thus opens the way to analyzing how the arrangements specific to each mobilization site are articulated with the social dispositions of the actors engaged in them. But to grasp all the subtlety of these processes of adjustment or mismatch between social arrangements and dispositions, their evolutions have to be observed over time. We propose for this purpose to let our theoretical approach be guided by the notion of the "activist career" (Agrikoliansky 2001, 2017; Fillieule 2001). Applied to the question of engagement, the concept of the career, as developed by interactionist sociology (Becker 2006; Darmon 2008; Goffman 2017; Hughes 1958), aims first to set the understanding of activism in a sequential perspective. A career is analyzed as a temporal succession of sequences of engagement. This implies bringing to light the processual logics through which this succession takes place and is articulated with biographical trajectories. The concept of the career thus seems to us particularly heuristic in the sense that it makes it possible to combine questions of the predisposition to and operationalization of activism, and of differentiated and variable forms of engagement over time (Fillieule 2010).

By focusing on how interactions during the mobilization are articulated with the YVs' social trajectories, analysis in terms of career makes it possible to give a dynamic account of how the activists permanently (re)negotiate their positions in the movement and, in doing so, shape the mobilization sites and their organizational norms. This (re)negotiation is conducted according to their subjective perception of



the material constraints and opportunities generated by the movement and the place they consider they could or should occupy within it. Thus, the notion of the career makes it possible to hold together the individual social trajectories, the views of the world that they produce, and the objective constraints that allow or prevent the maintenance of engagement in and attachment to the movement, its activities and its members (Auyero 2004; Fillieule 2005). In other words, the sub-spaces of mobilization constrain the activist career and give it shape, while each actor's activist career orients the way in which she makes a place for herself and contributes to the construction of the sub-spaces. We show the variability of these logics by observing the circulation, over time, of the activists among the sub-spaces of mobilization, and the consequences of this circulation for the way the actors take on their roles in the movement.

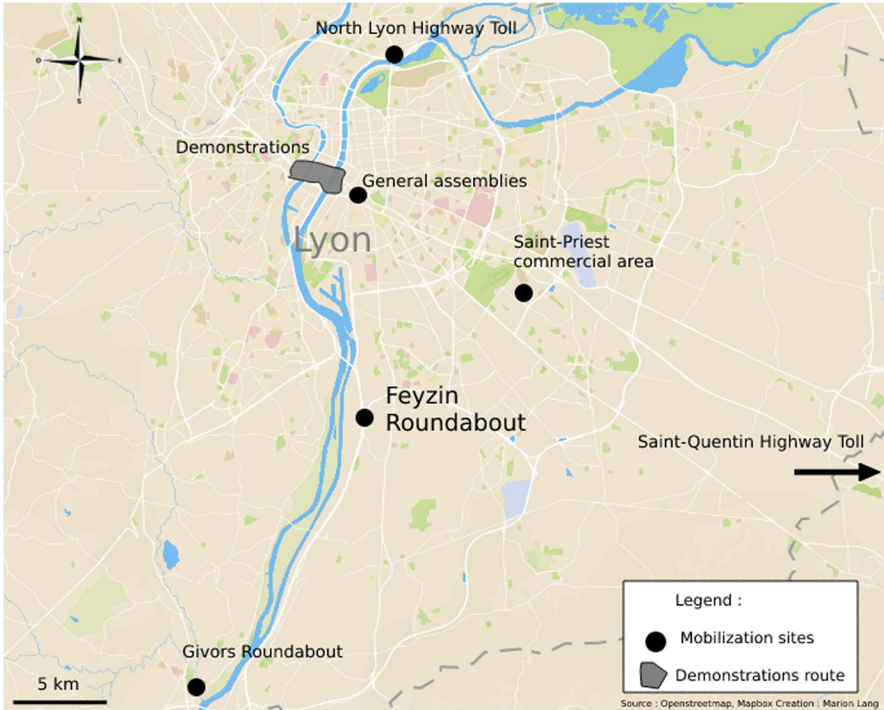
This article thus follows on from various studies that analyze the internal sociological heterogeneity of social movements and the power relations resulting from it. It highlights the agentic capacities of three activists in the YV movement and shows that the loose, decentralized structure of this movement allows for the emergence of spaces where it is possible, locally and temporarily, to subvert power relations. We show that there are no dominated or dominant positions in the movement per se, but a plurality of mobilization sites. These sites produce a plurality of power logics that are connected to a specific organizational pattern, as well as to the characteristics of the actors involved and their capacity to negotiate their positions in the division of activist labor.

As such, our demonstration is processual and chronological. We concentrate on the sequence between November 2018 and February 2019, i.e., shortly after the destruction of the camps ordered by the police, which modified the social-spatial equilibrium of the movement. We start by analyzing how the social and political background of Fathia, Émilie and Nathalie informed the way they entered the movement and looked for what they consider to be their rightful place, be it as organizer or grassroots activist. We then show how the mix of such backgrounds and their first steps in the movements led them to negotiate, stay in, or escape from the mobilization sites they frequented. Émilie rejected the usefulness of the roundabout and found her place in the general assembly in the city center. By contrast, Fathia and Nathalie spent much of their time on the roundabout, but they did not occupy the same positions in the power relationship structured by the division of activist labor.



## Method

Our collective ethnographic survey began on the first day of the mobilization (November 17, 2018) and



### *Map of the YV mobilization sites in the Lyon Metropolis*

We first investigated the Feyzin roundabout camp, located south of Lyon and settled from November 21 to December 20, 2018. Feyzin, a municipality of 10,000 inhabitants, is characterized by the strong presence of industrial activities that contributed to its post-war economic and demographic growth. Although it is not strictly speaking a working-class suburb, it is adjacent to some of the poorest municipalities in the agglomeration. Most of the people occupying the roundabout came from this area. In parallel, we observed the mobilization within Lyon, the central city of a metropolis of 1.3 million people, where citizens' assemblies and demonstrations were held on a weekly basis. These assemblies brought together YVs from all across the area, with the majority of mobilized activists coming from the city center

We therefore focused on three sites of mobilization over a long period of time (assemblies, demonstrations, the roundabout). We chose to probe as deeply as possible into the ordinary tasks and interactions of the YVs and our investigation follows the classic path of participant observation (Becker 1963; Goffman 2017). During these ethnographic observations, we crossed paths with Fathia, Émilie and Nathalie. We thus participated with them in the various activities of the roundabout (construction and maintenance of the camp, participation in actions such as food distribution to the homeless, blockades), in the citizens' assemblies (participation in discussions) and in the demonstrations. Beyond the survey material that they represented, these multiple contacts were key to establishing relations of trust and securing long interviews (about four hours on average) with Fathia, Émilie and Nathalie in a more personal setting, at home or in a restaurant. These interviews are part of the forty or so semi-structured interviews conducted in addition to our observations, which address their involvement in the movement and the biographies of the activists. A first wave was conducted during 2019, and some of these interviews were repeated in January 2020, as was the case with Émilie



## Becoming a Yellow Vest activist: finding a place during the first days of mobilization

Nathalie, Fathia and Émilie did not enter the mobilization in the same way. They had neither the same social trajectories nor the same ways of finding their place in the movement. The specificity of their trajectories structures the way they analyze the injustice against which they want to protest, including the role they want to or agree to play in the movement. Introducing the concept of the career not only brings to light the aspects that make it possible to objectivate their social trajectories but also implies recreating the way our three respondents made use of some of these aspects to give meaning to their progression (Darmon 2008). In this context, the place of gender relations is introduced in variable ways for each of them, structuring differentiated relations to their activist engagement.

### Social downgrading, fragile upward mobility, and politicization of the domestic sphere: when activists' backgrounds structure the perception of their own involvement

On this Saturday, November 17, 2018, the main common demand of the YVs gathered on the roundabouts seemed clear: the government must withdraw its gas tax plan. But as the cases of Fathia, Nathalie and Émilie show, this collective call did not have the same meaning nor lead to the same method of entry into the movement for all participants, as they did not join the mobilization at the same moment in their respective biographies. While Émilie was experiencing a period of fragile upward social mobility, Fathia and Nathalie were in a situation of social downgrading. These experiences of social mobility are accompanied by a questioning of patriarchal institutions, starting with their respective family cells, which they explicitly see as spaces of discomfort and/or domination. Fathia, aged 60, is one of the activists who joined the movement from the first day of the mobilization. Her commitment is part of a long political trajectory which moves through a situation of social downgrading. Her father was born in French colonial Algeria and emigrated to France as a young boy. As a communist and activist in the Algerian National Liberation Front, he “used to talk a lot about politics” and often took his family to demonstrations. Her mother was born in France and devoted most of her life to housework. She did not involve Fathia in household chores, but regularly asked her to run errands, taking care of the family's business at the post office, school, bank and Family Benefits Center. Fathia was thus very familiar with the urban area where she spent the first day of mobilization.

Overview of the three activists followed

	Fathia	Émilie	Nathalie
Age	≈ 60	≈ 30	≈ 50
Parents' last job	Mother: housewife Father: supermarket security guard	Mother and father: farmers	Mother: factory seamstress Father: boilermaker



## Overview of the three activists followed

	Fathia	Émilie	Nathalie
Qualification and last job	No qualification School canteen employee. At the time of the survey, recipient of the minimum social incomes	2-year technical degree in management. After-school activity leader. At the time of the survey, in professional retraining in psychomotricity	Typing diploma Restaurant owner. At the time of the survey, recipient of the minimum social income
Family situation	Divorced, 3 grown-up children	Single, no children	Divorced, 2 grown-up children

Fathia has no qualifications and did not study after high school. She married young and had her first child at 19. Three years later, she became a nanny and then worked as a substitute childcare worker at her son's school, where she thrived. Her situation steadily improved and she went on to become the team leader: "I was out in the field with everyone, directing and keeping an eye on everything, and... the members of my team had to have lots of ideas!".

But this period of her life, which she "loved", came to an end in the early 1990s when she divorced. Her ex-husband refused to take care of their three children and she had to find work in a school canteen. This episode of patriarchal domination is a major shift in her life path. She joined a union, took part in several strikes, and shared in several collective victories. Later, an occupational accident from which she never fully recovered once again shattered her occupational trajectory. Her income dropped, she lost her apartment and became homeless several times, before finding a place in the shelter where she lives today. Still unemployed, she receives between 550 and 700 € in social benefits each month.

During the protests and interviews, she expressed her disillusionment with politics (she used to vote for the left, and began voting blank during the 1990s), which had offered no solution to her social decline over the past 30 years, nor any support for the causes she is involved in (e.g., undocumented migrants, the Palestinian cause). But her testimony also manifests a belief in the validity or potential of collective mobilizations. As such, the movement represents a new alternative: "I warned my family, I said 'Don't count on me any more! That's it, from the 17th, I'm out.'".

The situation is different for Émilie, one of the few demonstrators gathered in Place Bellecour in the heart of the city. She is not in a situation of social downgrading, but has experienced a fragile upward social mobility through school; her chances of success are increasingly threatened by the government's neo-liberal policies. Her parents rent a small farm in the west of France. Unlike Fathia, Émilie is one of the activists who, until the early stages of the mobilization, had had a very distant relationship to politics. She grew up in a family where politics was not a topic of conversation, and she only knows that her father votes "for the right wing". Throughout our two interviews, she was careful to distance herself from her family circle, whose attitudes and political behaviors she disapproves of and where was first taught to "shut up and not think". Above all, and several times,



she was critical of her father, with whom she avoids talking about her involvement in the movement, and made a point of telling us she could only talk with her mother.

Quite early in the interview, she told us about her birth handicap, which resulted in her receiving a very sheltered upbringing during which many things were off-limits for her, including some vocational options. She first obtained a two-year technical degree in management and became a management assistant for a few years, later working as an after-school activity leader. However, this did not suit her, and she embarked on a training course in psychomotricity.

That is why she moved to Lyon some years ago. Unlike Fathia, Émilie has a strong belief in educational and political institutions. The upward social mobility she is experiencing is intrinsically linked to her positive attitude towards schooling, which values effort and respect for rules, in line with the education she received from her Catholic parents. Thus, her training course was supposed to last three years, but she repeated two years without withdrawing. She saw the movement as an opportunity to stop the government measures that threatened her precarious upward mobility, and which she saw as devaluing the work efforts that she was struggling to make.

Nathalie, the third activist, put even more emphasis on her trajectory as a woman to explain her feeling of injustice and the reasons she wanted to join in the movement. The daughter of a factory seamstress and a boiler worker employed in the Feyzin factories, Nathalie is 50 years old and lives alone. She was caustic about the education she had received, which she thinks was particularly disadvantageous to her as a woman. She explained that she was destined by her parents and school for a career as a secretary: "So, for a boy, it was accounting, for a girl it was shorthand typing."

At home, Nathalie remembers that no one talked about politics, and how you voted "was not something you talked about". These restrictions came mainly from her father, whom she describes as "macho" and dominating her mother. She also finds traces of this form of masculinity in her ex-husband, with whom she had her first child at the age of 19; several years later, they opened a restaurant together. She took out a loan in her name and the business was a success, so she was able to manage her job and motherhood at the same time. But her marriage later broke up and her husband emptied the joint business account, leading to their divorce.

A period of great financial and legal precarity ensued, during which Nathalie "suddenly went into freefall". The police failed to recognize her husband's domestic violence and she could not get payment of all the alimony due to her. Moreover, she was forced to pay back the restaurant debt alone as her ex-husband's theft of the money by was not recognized, because they were married under a joint property regime. She draws from this experience a particularly critical reading of the legal system, experienced as sexist and classist: "Life experiences like that... they bring back to you all these laws made by all the people who rule over you, that are made by men, that are made by rich men."

The political meaning that she attaches to the YV movement is intrinsically linked to this trajectory, which is structured by a permanent feeling of dispossession. The declared horizontality of the movement thus leads her to hope that what she calls "the classic pattern [...] where you have one person in charge" will not occur.



## Become an organizer or a grassroots activist? Differentiated adjustment of activist practices in the first stages of the mobilization

As suggested by sociologists of social movements who use the concept of the career in their analyses, an understanding of the modalities through which agents invest, in practice, in the mobilization cannot be limited to analysis of the set of social predispositions that make their involvement probable and condition it. One also has to grasp how, in an uncertain and constraining context, Fathia, Nathalie and Émilie conceive what they see as a “useful”, “legitimate” or “reasonable” commitment to the YV movement (Diani and McAdam 2003). In the early weeks, the movement was characterized by its “fluidity” (Taylor 1999): the roles, forms of organization and repertoires of actions that structured it were still weakly codified and not the object of a consensus. The sequence then generated plural, often tentative investments, through which the actors’ practices gradually adjusted to their dispositions and their resources. Past internalization of gender relations plays an important role in, among other things, the way each of these women takes on her activist role, whether as a “grassroots activist” or as an “organizer”.

Émilie responded to the calls for mobilization made on social networks. At that time, she was repeating her last year as a student and only had to submit a dissertation at the end of the academic year. She was single and childless and had time to get actively involved (McAdam 1992). On November 17, she went to downtown Lyon, not far from where she lives. Although she had little experience of social movements, she tried to get in touch with an activist she identified as the organizer of the demonstration. She wanted to structure the movement, which she saw as quite disorganized, revealing her faith in the institutional norm that should frame the movement.

From the earliest days of the mobilization, she tried to take on a role as an organizer. During the first day, she tried without success to persuade the participants to extend the demonstration to the end of the afternoon. Many of them had been demonstrating for several hours and had already followed various calls from other self-proclaimed organizers, some of whom were affiliated to the Facebook networks that had called for the November 17 mobilizations (e.g., “La France en colère”). On that day she was also unable to find out how to get closer to the informal group of YVs who met at the end of the demonstration to organize the next and following Saturdays. Émilie’s failures can be understood due to her lack of experience as an activist. It was difficult for her to become an “organizer” by adjusting this role to her competences and inclinations. As she told us, she wanted above all to “communicate” and “convince” through debate and discussion. She contrasts such ways of behaving within the mobilization with the “strong”, “radicalized” or “violent” actions that in her view characterized the first demonstrations. The mismatch between her embodied representations of what a “legitimate mobilization” is and her experience of the demonstration led her to turn to other sites. She met various activists who guided her to other emergent spaces of the mobilization such as the general assemblies downtown where her competences could be better used.

For Nathalie, who cannot remember if she had ever taken part in a demonstration in the past, the blurred and disorganized nature of the movement was a source



of anxiety. Like Émilie, Nathalie had time to get involved. When the mobilization started, she was unemployed and single, and her grown-up children were no longer her direct responsibility. Although she heard about the protest on November 17, she joined the movement the weekend after. She also chose the demonstration in downtown Lyon. During the interview, she stressed that she was very careful in dealing with the first interactions. Looking for people “on the same wavelength” as her, she took particular care not to demonstrate with the “wrong people.” It was not so much a matter of avoiding individuals whose ideas she disagreed with, but rather those who could put her in physical danger, such as vandals (“*casseurs*”). More broadly, Nathalie tried to avoid situations that could trigger the vigilance imposed on women in the public space (Condon, Lieber, and Maillachon 2005).

While Nathalie set herself apart from the figure of the “organizer”, her capacity to get involved as a “grassroots activist” was equally shaped by “trials” that activated different embodied dispositions. The demonstrations, punctuated by intense episodes of repression, were one of these. In an interview, she related one of her first interactions with a woman she described as “a bit loony”, because during the demonstration she confessed her intention to date male YVs, inviting Nathalie to join her in this “mission”. Quickly avoiding her, Nathalie preferred to get closer to a group of retired people, as a way of keeping at bay both the risks to her physical integrity and potential seductive behavior. Internalization of gender relations has direct effects of the sequencing of the career. Although she went to the demonstrations alone, she saw herself as more vulnerable as a woman and did not want to walk around alone. So she looked for people she could trust, with whom she could roam the streets. On the third Saturday of protest, she demonstrated alongside a couple of activists whom she thought trustworthy. Like her, they did not feel at ease in the demonstrations. The three of them then discussed a roundabout on the outskirts of Lyon, where they agreed to meet up and continue their involvement in other ways.

Fathia, the third woman we observed, did not have the same preoccupations. She was older and less likely to be seen, or fear being seen, as sexually available (Lieber 2008: 202–232). Thanks to her political background and education, she was also more used to occupying the public space for political gatherings. On the first day of the movement, she went to the mobilization site closest to her home, in the parking lot of the Saint-Priest supermarket (see map), not knowing what kind of actions she would be taking part in. This choice was guided by material constraints, as she does not have a car but could get to this meeting point by bus. But it was also linked to her familiarity with this locality, since she spent part of her childhood not far from the supermarket and she currently lives in the town of Saint-Priest.

Fathia's approach to the first days of the mobilization was quite different from those of the other two. Like Émilie and Nathalie, she had time available to get involved, since she was unemployed and her children were grown up. But in contrast to the others, she was used to taking part in social movements from a young age in support of numerous political causes (veiled women, support for Palestine, protest against the former Algerian president) and for better working conditions. These experiences allowed her to join in the actions organized on November 17th with a sense of calm, unlike Nathalie and Émilie. So she helped block access to the supermarket and disrupted road traffic with the other YVs. Her activist experience



gave her a greater understanding of the blurred nature of the movement and her own potential role. She had no car and her first interactions were thus aimed at ensuring that this would not jeopardize her participation in the movement. When the idea of joining another mobilization point in Saint-Quentin-Fallavier (20 km away) was suddenly devised by the activists, Fathia's only problem was: "How can I get there?" No public transport option seemed convenient, so she asked other participants to give her a lift. She did the same a few days later in the crowd of demonstrators in Saint-Quentin-Fallavier when she heard a call to join a roundabout in Feyzin, closer to her home.

Thus, while they all occupied subordinate positions at the time of their entry into the movement (none of them called for the gathering, nor led any demonstration) their dispositions led them to make different choices. This variation can also be observed in the way the three women acted at the same mobilization site, the Feyzin roundabout.

### **Maintaining involvement: strategic dilemmas and appropriation of plural repertoires of action**

While the movement was characterized by its "fluidity" in the first three weeks of mobilization, its scenes, repertoires and organizational forms were stabilized as it settled into permanence. It was in this context that we were able to observe the modalities through which the activists pursued their involvement in singular ways. We aim to show that the choice of places is not neutral with regard to the resources and dispositions of each of them. It nonetheless has a strong impact on the way the three women mobilized, by favoring – or hindering – the pursuit of their involvement.

#### **To go or not to go to the roundabout?**

Contrary to media reports which mainly focused on roundabouts as the dominant spaces of mobilization, localized analysis of the mobilization shows that the YV movement unfolded over various different sites in the Lyon conurbation. The choice of becoming involved on the roundabouts – or not – has to be reconstructed in this perspective: it was one option among others that presented itself to the actors in the movement for pursuing their involvement in the long term.

Thus, the Feyzin roundabout was not occupied from the 17th of November. A group of twenty or so YVs from Saint-Quentin-Fallavier were chased away by the police and decided to set themselves up there a few days after the start of the movement. It looked like other roundabouts described elsewhere in France: a campfire on the ground, poles and tarpaulins covering approximately a ten-meter area and sheltering a kitchen where biscuits, cakes, canned food, sausages and cheeses were piled up on a table. The living conditions there were precarious. The facilities were fragile and several times the winter weather damaged the makeshift structures built by the YVs. The crowded conditions, the cold, the smoke from the campfires and



the endless waiting made these places “physically and mentally costly” (Bernard de Raymond and Bordiec 2019). But the acceptability of this “cost” was not shared equally among the participants, who adjusted to it more or less successfully. While some people were just passing through, others spent their nights on improvised beds set up under the tarpaulins. Some of them were homeless but others simply wanted to “hold the roundabout”. The valorization or depreciation of this activist task first depended heavily on class characteristics. The higher the level of education, the less the activists observed stayed for long periods of time, considering that this was not a good way of devoting to the movement. One can understand why by comparing Émilie’s and Fathia’s experiences.

Fathia is one of those who settled in the camp during the first days of mobilization. She had been homeless and had lived in collective shelters, had taken part in many non-conventional operations in her activist career, and had learned how to endure atmospheric and living conditions such as those of the roundabout. On the 17th, when the couple who brought her there by car offered to take her back, she declined (“I said, ‘Oh no, I’ll stay, I’ll see tomorrow’”) and helped set up the camp. She stayed almost continuously in the camp, day and night, until its destruction in mid-December. As we were able to observe, she acquired decision-making power and became highly visible through the control of food in the camp. She was the one who managed the stocks, made sure that everyone got enough to eat, and allocated the quantities to which everyone was entitled.

The forms of organization and the division of activist labor observable on the roundabouts are particularly favorable to the reinvestment of skills acquired in charitable or mutual-aid associations, where caring activities predominate and women are historically over-represented (Bedock et al. 2019). The case of Fathia is particularly enlightening, as she reactivated skills previously acquired in a poor people’s aid association and as the manager of a childcare workers’ team. For example, she organized a mobile team to pack up the sandwiches stored on the camp that were close to their expiry date and distribute them to the homeless in downtown Lyon. She was also sometimes criticized for her bossiness, especially since she assigned housekeeping tasks (laundry, tidying up, etc.) to the others. A small group of young people, some of whom claimed the leadership of the camp by controlling its schedule (operations, assemblies, etc.) and its Facebook page, were notably annoyed by Fathia’s behavior. This type of tension was, however, usually defused by the dynamic daily life of the roundabout.

The roundabout was thus a mobilization site where certain dispositions and behaviors such as care for others could be particularly valorized and so reinforce activist engagement. Nathalie explained to us that she felt particularly at ease in the camp because it was possible to spend several hours, even several days, simply exchanging conversation about each person’s familial, occupational and personal situation without having to demonstrate formal political competences. During the interview she stressed how much the roundabout was a place of benevolence:

But yeah at first you don’t dare, it’s due to timidity I think, it’s not self-evident, people don’t know one another, it’s an unknown situation, people you don’t know. And then you think, if I want to say something, I could say it. People



won't laugh or if they do it's just good humor, so... and that does you good, I find. [...] It's an experience... you know, it's not a work context, it's not a context you know from life before, that you're used to.

Because the roundabout is a place she judged "safe", where neither her lack of activist background nor her initial concern to stay away from the most violent forms of mobilization were barriers to involvement, Nathalie progressively increased her presence in the camp. From early September she spent all her evenings there, sometimes staying until late at night. As her trust in the people she met there grew stronger, she increasingly allowed herself to take part in collective operations that she judged riskier, such as nighttime occupation of the entrance to an oil refinery or invading public buildings. In the short and medium term, the adjustment between the organizational forms and the actors' social dispositions favored the persistence in involvement of individuals who might at first sight seem remote from social mobilizations.

The case of Émilie differs rather strongly, however, from those of Fathia and Nathalie, and from this point of view it constitutes an exemplary case of mismatch. Her time at Feyzin was not a pleasant experience. She heard about the camp and the operations organized there a few days after its construction. Not being at all familiar with that type of place and atmosphere, she did not personally know anyone who was occupying a roundabout in France, and hesitated to go to Feyzin: "I didn't know what I was getting into." She decided to give it a try when she found someone in the city center to go with her, so she did not have to go there alone. The wood smoke triggered her asthma and she could not see the point of being "stuck on a roundabout" because "you aren't explaining anything, you're just saying you're dissatisfied". She contrasted this form of action with behaviors more aligned on what her school career had taught her to value, based on mastery of language and argument. This led her to reject what she saw as a useless type of participation in the movement: "On the other hand, communication for me is useful because you explain why you are protesting."

Émilie did not return to Feyzin after her time there. She preferred to abandon the roundabout to find what she considered a more comfortable place. She joined the general assembly organization group in the city center through a Yellow Vest activist she met on a Saturday demonstration.

These assemblies took place every Monday evening from early January in the enclosure of a public building managed by the trade union organizations, or on the adjoining public square when the space made available to them was too small. The general assembly was part of the heritage of the "movements of the squares" (Lubin 2012). It is the same place that hosted the Nuit Debout movement in 2016, from which the YV assembly also took on certain organizational traits (Della Sudda and Guionnet 2021) as well as certain participants. Just as with the Nuit Debout movement, while women were encouraged to participate, most of the speakers were men. This relates more broadly to the functioning of the assembly, which valued certain types of activist skills in public speaking, perceived as "masculine", such as the self-authorization to take the floor or the socially constructed legitimacy to hold an audience's attention in a noisy environment (Navarre 2015).



After a few weeks, Émilie acquired a role organizing these weekly assemblies. She hosted several of the organization meetings in her house in Lyon, and became one of the coordinators of the treasury committee. This privileged position was certainly relative: the treasury committee collected only a little money and Émilie did not speak at the assembly, nor take part in organizing demonstrations. However, it clearly set her apart from the ordinary participants in the assemblies. So Émilie considered herself extremely “lucky” to be integrated into this group and to have been given this role. The activist tasks and work valued in the city center were closer to what she saw as useful activities for the movement. Her resources thus allowed her to trade an unsatisfactory and marginal place on the roundabout for a position in the city center, which, although not dominant, provided her with a certain number of symbolic and self-attributed rewards that she regarded as satisfactory.

By contrast, the most active YVs on the Feyzin roundabout, where most of the population had little cultural capital, expressed a certain distance from, or even distrust of, the general assembly. They criticized the deliberative process, which they sometimes associated with a form of inaction. Even when we met Sonia, an unemployed retail worker in her thirties who occupied a prominent place in Feyzin, she explained that she only came to these Monday assemblies “when she had time and had nothing else to do” referring in particular to the time she devoted to the roundabout.

### **The roundabout: between reproduction of the gender order and a space of emancipation**

A gendered division of tasks can be observed in the encampment on the Feyzin roundabout. The essential supply of pallets and metal structures was provided by YV members who took the opportunity to convert occupational resources into activist resources. This role of “builders” was one of the conditions for the durability of the roundabout and contributed to making it a place of life (Ravelli 2020a). The role was mainly fulfilled by men: the resources are closely linked to the exercise of occupations that are still essentially male-dominated (Gallioz 2006). But this living-space function was also based on “activist work with domestic connotation” (Dunzatz 2017: 265), mainly done by women and consisting of other crucial activities, such as drawing up the rules for living together and managing food stocks on a daily basis.

In addition to its function as a place to live, the Feyzin roundabout also played the tactical role of a place to organize actions. It was the assembly point for groups of YVs for various activist operations: refinery blockades, intrusions into buildings representing political power, etc. These actions, sometimes illegal and often taking place at night, highlight a specific form of masculinity, i.e., that associated with virility (Rivoal 2017) by the endangerment of the body and the risk of confrontation with the authorities. These activist tasks relate to representations of direct action promoting “warlike” forms of mobilization often unlikely to socially encourage women's participation (Bugnon 2015).



During our presence in the camp, we often observed interactions reflecting a gendered division of tasks which maintained the reproduction of social relations of gender within the space of mobilization. One day, when Fathia asked several times for volunteers to do the laundry, Nathalie reluctantly volunteered:

You say to yourself, “Well, be nice,” but you don’t really want to, you hope that someone else will take your place, because you rather want to stay, to know if there is going to be an interesting operation rather than a laundry operation!

In the camp, Nathalie alternated between gendered assignments that she considered unacceptable and others which she consented to because she saw them as important activities that she was proud to take part in, such as when “the men [...] tell the women to go in front” during road blocking operations, so as to increase the chances that the truckers will stop and slow down the traffic when the YVs offer them a coffee: “I see it as for the movement.”

For one month, Nathalie and Fathia jostled to find their place on the roundabout, but not in the same ways. Nathalie tried to avoid uncomfortable positions that brought her back to her gendered assignments, and tried to secure other opportunities available at the camp. Her daily presence in the camp was moreover a means for her to free herself from the assignments that characterized her everyday life, starting with those she recognized from her own family cell. In the course of a discussion about the roundabout, she expressed her pleasure that this place allowed her a temporary escape from the role of mother that she had reluctantly had to take up again when one of her sons temporarily moved back home. She was also pleased that she had told her son he need not worry about her when she went to the camp, saying to him: “OK, enough is enough, I’m not just a mum, I’m going to spend a bit of time doing what I want, going to Feyzin.” The existence of the camp gave her an opportunity to break free from assignment to the domestic space, envisaging the roundabout as a space of sociability that belonged only to her.

By contrast, Fathia used her activist and gendered occupational skills to become a central actor of the place. Reactivating the skills she had acquired in associations or in some of her occupational experiences, she actively took on the role of organizer and, from late November to early January, she was a key figure in the mobilization at Feyzin. On the roundabout, everyone knew her and—initially at least—trusted her. Her involvement in creating an association to give permanence to the YVs of Feyzin in distributing food to the homeless is evidence of this. For her, as for Nathalie, the roundabout was thus a space of emancipation from gender assignments. More precisely, in Fathia’s case, this liberation paradoxically came through the activation of gendered dispositions.

The statuses and roles that the two of them acquired within the space of mobilization were, however, fragile; they strongly depended on the existence of that singular space (Blavier and Walker 2020). The repression applied to the roundabout camps was stepped up from mid-December, accompanied by the destruction of the majority of them, including Feyzin. The mobile balance of tension that had been sustained mid-November was destabilized by this, because it called into question the existence of the Yellow Vests of Feyzin as a group. More broadly, the forms of involvement were reconfigured. A few days after the demolition, Fathia and a few YVs with



whom she had kept contact decided to set up a new camp at the very same place. But she feared that this initiative might be misinterpreted by the former occupants of the roundabout, especially by the group of young people claiming leadership of it. Nonetheless, she decided to inform them. When they heard the news, they went to the site and stopped the construction process, refusing to let such an action be taken without their participation. Fathia described the violence of their behavior. They tried to damage the installations and physically threatened some of the other YVs on the site. She then continued her involvement in the movement by going to Saturday demonstrations in Lyon, taking care to avoid the people with whom she had been mobilized at Feyzin.

Nathalie also saw tensions emerge after the destruction of the camp. Some of its former inhabitants did indeed choose to join other mobilization sites such as the NLH toll (see map). But Nathalie did not show up, because she did not trust the actions organized at NLH, whereas she trusted those organized at the roundabout. In her view, her absence was seen as a betrayal by the YVs at NLH, who questioned the sincerity of her commitment to the movement, calling her a “traitor”. Thus, her new self-confidence acquired on the roundabout and the confidence of several other activists led her to take part in actions that she would not have joined previously, such as demonstrations in the city center where she went with other activists from Feyzin.

Both Nathalie and Fathia explained how the destruction of the camp on the roundabout distanced them from a large number of the YVs with whom they had shared their daily lives. The roles that they acquired in the movement, and more specifically on the roundabout, were thus weakened. Maintaining commitment to the YV movement after the destruction of the Feyzin camp was a test for both women. The situation was very different for Émilie, as she had distanced herself from the roundabout very early on, in favor of the citizens' assemblies in the city center. Her commitment to the movement was not called into question by the removal of the camp. In the weeks following the end of the roundabout camp, her feeling of belonging to the movement seems rather to have been at its peak, and she said she was ready to “die for the cause”.

## Conclusion

Analysis in terms of activist careers sheds light on the construction and the spatial and temporal variability of domination mechanisms that structure a social movement. In putting forward such an analysis, this paper makes several contributions to analysis of both the YV movement and the socio-spatial dynamics within social movements in general.

We have analyzed the activist trajectories of Émilie, Fathia and Nathalie over a period of three months, during which they were often exposed to the same sites and mobilization methods, but engaged with them in different ways. Use of the concept of the career has enabled us to show how the expectations and ways in which the three women understood the people and situations they encountered in the movement were guided by their trajectories, and by their perception of their own position



in the power logics produced by the division of activist labor. The agency they possessed to negotiate their place in the movement and to extract themselves from various positions varied in time and space. While *Émilie* preferred to be involved in the city center, *Nathalie* and *Fathia* found their place in the camp by negotiating their positions in the gender order and the value of the tasks assigned to them.

In this regard our analysis underscores the importance of holding together study of the interactions within the movement with study of social trajectories. Since *Fathia*, *Émilie* and *Nathalie* entered the movement without apparent mediation (family, friends, activist group, etc.), a purely interactionist perspective focused on the movement itself might overlook the fact that they entered from different positions in social space, and with diverse perceptions, skills, reflexes and norms of behavior. Even when actors act on their own, they carry with them the weight of their previous collective socializations (Lahire 2018: 89–98). The movement does indeed have its own logic which partly guides the behavior and agency of its participants (Ravelli 2020b). But to limit the analysis to such “contextualism” renders invisible the “social forces that, although prior and external to the ‘fieldwork,’ are determinant” (Lignier 2019: 79). The case of *Fathia* shows for instance that experienced activists are more at ease within the mobilization, as they adapt more easily to the various eventualities (uncertainties about the nature of the movement, repression, conflicts with other activists).

In retracing the activist itineraries of these three women, we have been able to bring to light the conditions of possibility of a subversion, albeit partial and temporary, of the relations of domination (in particular of gender) that are exerted on them. These conditions depend on their social trajectories and the ways in which they adjust to the constraints and opportunities offered by the different sub-spaces of mobilization. These chances of subversion are also subject to exogenous constraints, such as police repression, which make possible or prevent the existence of certain sub-spaces.

Our work thus underscores the importance of the spatial dimension of social movements. Localized study of the YV movement brings to light the diversity of the sub-spaces of mobilization: the roundabouts, demonstrations and assemblies do not only relate to differences in terms of geographic localization. Each generates distinct organizational norms favoring or hindering the investment of different activists. In other words, this article seeks to be a contribution to analysis of the socio-spatial relations that structure social movements, by restoring the multidimensional character of these relations (Jessop et al. 2008).

Finally, our case study shows the heuristic scope of the notion of the activist career in the analysis of social movements. As well as articulating study of social trajectories and interactions, it also makes it possible to analyze dialectically the individual logics of engagement and the plural organizational norms that govern social movements. It opens the way to a dynamic analysis of social mobilizations, attentive to their evolutions over time and in space. While the concept of the career stems from American works in interactionist sociology, it is currently little used in Anglo-American works (Fillieule 2010), whereas it is enjoying great success in France (Agrikoliansky 2017). We thus aim to show the utility of this concept through the case of the Yellow Vests, which, although specifically French (Fredette



2020), makes it possible to understand more generally the plural character of social mobilizations, according to the spaces in which they unfold. The “movements of the squares” that have developed along the lines of Occupy Wall Street, and on which the Yellow Vests can be seen as a variation (Della Sudda and Guionnet 2021; Ozarow 2019) then seem to lend themselves particularly well to an analysis attentive to the socio-spatial logics of mobilizations and their effects of inclusion/exclusion on the activists.

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