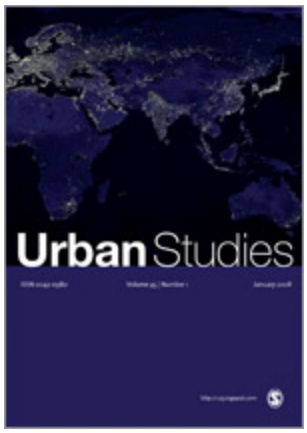

Realising direct democracy through representative democracy: from the Yellow Vests to a libertarian municipalist strategy in Commercy

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Abstract

Among the many criticisms carried by the Yellow Vests movement, criticisms related to representative government as a mode of exercising power occupy a prominent place and find resonance within the broader contemporary crisis of representative democracy. In the face of this crisis, the Yellow Vests movement has put forward many alternative propositions for direct democracy. This contribution focuses on the local experiment of assembly direct democracy that has taken place in the municipality of Commercy, a town in the Meuse region of Eastern France, from the beginning of the Yellow Vests movement to the municipal elections of March 2020. The contribution studies the specific strategy the movement adopted, that of running for elections to give power to the assembly gathering the town residents. As the movement created a form of direct democracy—the assembly—to mark its opposition to representative democracy, and then used the paradigmatic mechanism of representative democracy—the elections—to give power to the assembly, it enables to understand how a movement navigated the dialectical relationship between representative and direct democracy in the framework of a libertarian municipalist electoral strategy and the tensions and limits that have arisen in the process.

Keywords

Direct Democracy; (Libertarian) Municipalism; Popular Assemblies; Yellow Vests; Local Elections

Introduction

Since 17 November 2018, the Yellow Vests movement has shaken France, as well as the traditional conceptual frameworks of mass social movements. Though the movement is extremely diverse in terms of its socio-economic composition, its modes of organisation and action and its political orientations, it is nevertheless unified by a set of shared criticisms: criticism of tax injustice and the subsequent decline of purchasing power, of a ruling class disconnected from the majority of the population and of representative democracy as a mode of exercising power. This last criticism is not new, and finds resonance with the broader contemporary crisis of representative democracy that is claimed both by civil society and in the democratic theory literature (Papadopoulos, 2013; Przeworski, 2019; Landemore, 2020). Indeed, whether it is the growing gap between the ruler and the ruled, the decline of electoral participation, the rise of populism or the loss of confidence in democratic institutions driving individuals away from politics, signs that representative democracy is in crisis proliferate; the Yellow Vests movement being only one among many. In the face of this crisis, this movement has put forward many alternative and concrete propositions for the democratisation of political power, many of them pertaining to direct democracy. These propositions vary from (local) Citizens' Initiative Referendum to constituent assemblies, local popular assemblies and assemblies of assemblies.

This contribution focuses on the specific experiment of direct democracy in the form of assemblies that has taken place in Commercy, a town in the Meuse region of Eastern France, from the beginning of the Yellow Vests movement to the municipal elections of March 2020. The movement began spontaneously with the local incarnation of the

national movement. Sharing with libertarian municipalism, a radical strand of municipalism, many common features, it organised the struggle in popular assemblies and found inspiration in this theory to continue the project by institutionalising direct democracy through representative democracy. The contribution studies the specific strategy it adopted, that of running for elections to give power to the assembly gathering the town residents. Unlike other municipalist experiments opting for the electoral strategy in Spain (Ordóñez et al., 2018; Roth et al., 2019; Russel, 2019; Blanco et al., 2020; Bua and Bussu, 2021; Janoschka and Mota, 2021) or in France (Gourgues et al., 2020), the one of Commercy has not acceded to power. However, analysing this case enables to capture the limits of aiming to establish direct democracy through representative democracy.

This article is structured in three parts. The first develops the conception of libertarian municipalism, situates it in comparison to other forms of municipalism, and explains how these ideas are mobilised by the participants in the field and how they connected to existing democratic practices. The second part offers a chronological narrative of the evolution of the experiment of Commercy, from the beginning of the Yellow Vests assemblies occupying the urban public space until March 2019, to the Citizens' Assembly[1] that decided to present candidates to the March 2020 municipal elections. Describing these local practices enables to capture how actors understand, practice and adapt direct democracy to their local conditions (Blanco et al., 2014). The third part proposes to study the theoretical and conceptual implications of this case study for assembly movements adopting an electoral libertarian municipalist strategy. As the

[1] To avoid any conceptual ambiguity, the assembly at hand was not a citizens' assembly in the meaning of a randomly selected mini-public, but an assembly open to all town residents.

movement created a form of direct democracy—the assembly—to mark its opposition to representative democracy, and then used the paradigmatic mechanism of representative democracy—the elections—to give power to the assembly, it enables to understand how a local movement navigated the dialectical relationship between representative and direct democracy in the framework of a libertarian municipalist electoral strategy and the tensions that have arisen in the process.

Through a thematic analysis, the article reflects on the data from a fieldwork in Commercy combining the following methods: 1) participant observation (presence, note-taking, recording, transcription, punctual intervention and logistical help) of a dozen meetings, ten assemblies, numerous activities and demonstrations during a series of stays in Commercy (36 full days in total from December 2018 to October 2020), with a status of researcher on direct democracy; 2) two rounds of semi-structured interviews, of respectively 20 and 16 participants in the citizens' list, before and after the municipal elections of 15 March 2020, either at their home, at the group's premises or in a town café; 3) participation (presence, recording, transcription and punctual intervention) in a group interview of a dozen participants on two days led by Prof. Michèle Riot-Sarcey on 27-28 June 2020 in the framework of her project of collective writing of the Yellow Vests' history by those who made it; and 4) textual analysis of movements' documents (leaflets, minutes, working documents, official documents, photographs).

1. Ideas in the field: libertarian municipalism in Commercy

First articulated by the American thinker Murray Bookchin, libertarian municipalism is often considered a radical strand of municipalism. This concept, sometimes also called

"new municipalism," encompasses forms of politics taking the local as the main level of action and aiming at giving power to the people through various forms of political action, whether electoral or not. In this sense, Laura Roth defines new municipalism as "a political strategy that differs from others in the fact that it not only pursues building power from a specific place (the local level) but also in its approach towards politics. Its aim is twofold: to implement progressive policies, but also to radically change the way politics is done" (2019: 1). Matthew Thompson captures it as "the democratic autonomy of municipalities . . . over political and economic life vis-à-vis the nation-state" (2020: 317). More generally, it denotes the global political movement developing since the *Fearless cities* summit organised by the movement *Barcelona en Comú* in June 2017 (Russel, 2019). As such, all municipalist movements do not engage in electoralism, generically defined as "the process of operating through competitive elections as part of the democratic process" (Ordóñez et al., 2018: 86). Like municipalist movements in France during the 2020 municipal elections (which is the context of this paper) (Gourgues et al., 2020) or in Spain during the 2015 municipal elections (Rubio-Pueyo, 2017), they can, but do not necessarily include such an electoral strategy.

What makes libertarian municipalism distinctive among the umbrella term of municipalism is its radical opposition to the state and representative democracy. Indeed, libertarian municipalism, also called communalism, sees the municipality as the place where communities collectively manage their affairs through face-to-face popular assemblies open to all residents of the commune in a direct democracy. Choosing the municipality as the main democratic unit does not mean that the local scale is *a priori* preferable, which could lead to the local trap (Purcell, 2006); but that it is the only place

where the people can gather, deliberate and directly take decisions together on a face-to-face basis, rather than having recourse to representatives to exercise public power. For matters beyond the boundaries of the municipality, these autonomous entities organise themselves on the confederal model, that is, in a network of councils sending recallable delegates to inter-municipal meetings. These delegates are strictly mandated by their respective assemblies in order to administer, coordinate and execute the policies decided by these assemblies (Bookchin, 2015). To bring about libertarian municipalism, Bookchin proposes two strategic paths. The first one is extra-institutional and consists in creating radically new alternative institutions by building extra-legal popular assemblies to manage communal affairs independently of the existing political system and acting as a counter-power to the municipal governments. The second one is institutional and suggests to engage with, and radically restructure, existing municipal institutions. This would be done by presenting a list to the municipal elections to give political power to the popular assembly through the elected people's mandates (Van Outryve, 2019). As such, the elected people would be endowed with an imperative mandate from the assembly, make their own its decisions and become its spokespeople at city council. As the experiment of Commercy adopted this second path, the article focuses on the specific electoral strategy within the radical repertoire of libertarian municipalism.

Even though libertarian municipalism conceptually differs from municipalism broadly construed, such a conceptual distinction is not always adopted by social actors when they use this word. Indeed, the movement studied in the paper more often used the generic term of municipalism to denote its political action (which is, in fact the electoral strategy of libertarian municipalism presented in this article). As such, when accounting for

debates among the movement, I will follow their usage of the word and not burden actors' quotes by adding the term "libertarian" to "municipalism," though it is clear that they convey libertarian municipalism's project.

In Commercy, the ideas of libertarian municipalism arrived thanks to the popular education work of a local association which purpose is to develop social link and enable people to have a say over their lives through local direct democracy. Composed of both militants (some of whom familiar with libertarian municipalism) and individuals, the association has its own premises in the town where it organises many activities (conferences, for example on libertarian municipalism, film screenings, debates, canteens, choir...). Already before its creation, and therefore before the beginning of the Yellow Vests movement, one of the association's founder organised a meeting on libertarian municipalism. One of the organisers of the first day of Yellow Vests mobilisation in Commercy, who had no prior political commitment, has attended this meeting and has been convinced by the idea of libertarian municipalism, but without subsequently joining the association. The Yellow Vests uprising was an occasion to connect the popular discontent with representative democracy to the political proposition of libertarian municipalism. However, the assembly direct democracy form that the movement - composed mostly of first-time protagonists - took since the beginning was not initially inspired by these theoretical ideas, but was the direct result of both material constraints and the critique of representative democracy that brought Yellow Vests to the streets. Progressively, people with knowledge about libertarian municipalism, a minority among the movement, proposed elements of the theory during strategical collective discussions in assembly to connect the already-existing praxis to these theoretical ideas,

while being wary not to monopolise speech. Several first-time activists became acquainted with libertarian municipalism's main ideas, which became more popular among the group, though not unanimous. As such, libertarian municipalism constitutes one of the responses to the critique of representative democracy and the democratic aspirations to give power back to the people carried by the group, echoing the democratic aspiration shared by 93% of people identifying themselves as Yellow Vests that it should be "the people, not the politicians, who should make the most important decisions" (Alexandre et al., 2019)[2].

2. Direct democracy in Commercy: from the shack to the elections

On 10 November 2018, in response to the call to paralyse France on 17 November to protest against the rise of fuel prices, an informal assembly gathered from one to two hundred people[3] in a bar in Commercy and almost unanimously decided to block the town a week later[4]. Participants were enthusiastic about the project and galvanised by the relatively important mobilisation in this small rural working-class town of about 5,400 people, who voted mainly for the socialists until the presidential elections of 2017, at the occasion of which the candidate of the far-right party *Rassemblement National* was favourite at the first round[5]. The demands written on the leaflet distributed on the 17th included the abolition of indirect taxes (including the fuel tax), pension revalorisation and equal pay, increases in public service budgets, ecological planning, tax equality and equal wealth distribution. They also proposed alternatives to the representative system:

[2] This analytical paragraph is translated from Van Outryve (2023).
[3] As testimonies about the numbers of people mobilised during each action mentioned in this section vary, numbers are often presented as a scale.
[4] As the factual story of what happened in Commercy cannot be told in so many different ways, some parts of this description section are taken from Van Outryve (2023).
[5] Official information on Commercy were found at Le Monde (2021).

constituent assembly, popular initiative referendum and *libertarian municipalism*. This last demand, generically defined in the leaflet as "a form of relocation of political decisions by a democratic popular assembly," went relatively unnoticed by the majority of participants more focused on purchasing power.

A week later, at a time when tens of thousands of Yellow Vests were blocking tollgates roundabouts all over France, between 500 and 1000 people carried out a series of blockades in Commercy, that the group decided to renew several times. A few days later, the group decided at a majority to establish a shack in the city centre. Built in two nights, this construction allowed them to be visible to local people and to have a fixed and sheltered place, "more confined and convivial" than a roundabout[6]. People could meet daily, discuss, welcome residents who came to share their problems, organise activities such as solidarity soups, store their belongings and the public's donations as well as logistically organise the assemblies—the planning, participatory agenda and minutes were posted publicly. A place of "human warmth, contact, fraternity," meeting, debate and collective decision-making during daily General Assemblies (GA), the shack was the cornerstone of Commercy's direct democracy experience in its early days. According to the participants, the GAs were very operational and concrete, deliberating on the movement's demands, strategic orientations it should take, collective actions it should participate in or organise, reactions it should have towards the mayor's hostility, relationship to the national movement, and logistical matters. After consensus-seeking

[6] Unless otherwise specified, all the quotes from this second section come from the group interview organised by Prof. Michèle Riot-Sarcey. All quotes throughout the paper are my own translation.

debate[7], everything was decided through a show-of-hands majoritarian vote. While the general assemblies of the first days of blockade gathered up to 150-200 participants, the ones during the first days of the shack gathered some 80 people initially, to then drop to a relatively stable number of about 50 regular people, mostly first-time protagonists.

It is from the shack that they broadcasted their calls to other Yellow Vests of France. Indeed, at the end of November 2018, in reaction to the government's demand to appoint eight representatives from the movement to negotiate, the Commercy Yellow Vests launched a first call to the Yellow Vests of France to refuse representation and to organise into popular assemblies everywhere: "If there must be delegates, it is at the level of each local Yellow Vests people's committee, closer to the voice of the people. With imperative, recallable and rotating mandates."[8] This call, the main slogan of which was "Power to the people, by the people and for the people," contained the basic characteristics of the Commercy experience, many of which are similar to the project of libertarian municipalism: the political legitimacy of the local popular assembly as a place of meeting, deliberation and decision, politics as the daily business of all and not the profession of a few, horizontality, equality of participation and the rejection of representation in favour of the delegation of power through imperative and recallable mandates. Following the enthusiastic feedback the first call received, these principles were subsequently reflected in the second call from the group to local Yellow Vests assemblies to appoint delegates—one woman and one man—to meet in an Assembly of assemblies in Commercy on 26-27 January 2019 with a binding, or imperative, mandate

[7] In this article, I more often use the term "debate" than "deliberation," as the former is used by participants. However, following Escobar's (2011) distinction between debate and deliberation, the activity in which the assembly was engaging was one of deliberation.
[8] For the text of the call, see Yellow Vests of Commercy (2018).

from their local group[9]. This endeavour attests to their will to build upon "the capacity of local actors to connect together local concerns," in order to move beyond localist and particular struggles towards more universal ones (Blanco et al., 2014: 3140).

End of January 2019, the right-wing mayor of Commercy, who had always shown animosity towards the movement, required the destruction of the shack. The Yellow Vests came as a group to city hall to ask if this decision could rather be taken on the basis of the population's opinion, to which the mayor answered: "It is not the people of Commercy who decide". In complete defiance of this statement, the Commercy Yellow Vests launched an informal grassroots local Citizen's Initiative Referendum campaign among the residents on the question of whether or not to keep the shack. The purpose was to realise what the mayor refused: that the people of Commercy decide. After a door-to-door campaign, three "homemade" polling stations were set up by the Yellow Vests throughout the city on the day of the vote. A recorded and public counting of votes showed that 534 people, out of an electorate of approximately 3,500 people and out of 574 participants in the vote, voted in favour of maintaining the shack. Nevertheless, the mayor remained deaf to the democratic mobilisation and had the shack destroyed at dawn in March, participating himself in its material destruction.

Combined with state repression against the national movement, exhaustion connected to time and energy investment at the expense of family and professional life and financial costs of participating in demonstrations, this event led to a certain fatigue of the local group in March 2019. Resigned to adapt to the loss of its collective space, the Yellow

[9] As this article focuses on the local direct democracy in Commercy, the Assembly of assemblies is only mentioned (for more information, see Kouvelakis, 2019; Bookchin and Van Outryve, 2019).

Vests of Commercy were forced to look for private places to meet. This meant deserting the occupation of the public space that was constitutive of their movement. As a result, they met less frequently and they had to adapt to the absence of a fixed place for the democratic organisation of their assembly, which led to dissociate the association of communal life and political life that the shack allowed.

Part of the group then decided to institutionalise the assembly on the long term. They created the *Commercy Citizens' Assembly* (CCA). This new organisational form was made up of some members from the Commercy Yellow Vests, but also of outsiders who joined the project through word-of-mouth, door-to-door recruitment, leaflet distribution and placarding sessions across town. This marked the transition from an assembly of struggle gathering Yellow Vests, rooted in the daily life of the struggle at the shack, to an assembly gathering Commercy's residents, rooted in the lived experience of the city inhabitants.

During its first iterations in May and June 2019, the assembly was seen as a place for meeting and exchange. Indeed, a participant in the first CCA organised on 10 June 2019 at *the Salles des Roises* in Commercy stated: "we meet, we discuss what we would like to do together, what is possible to do together, we debate in all equality with respect for each person." The deliberations in the assembly were mainly focused on criticism of representative democracy and the willingness of the inhabitants to regain power over their lives by discussing and deciding on matters that concern them.

During these assemblies, reflections about the possibility of running a list for the March 2020 municipal elections had already begun, and the idea to adopt this strategy was shared by many of the 50 or so participants. However, the decision to present a list for the March 2020 municipal elections was only adopted after deliberation and through a majoritarian vote at the September 2019 assembly. This decision was materialised by the mandate given by the CCA to a group of people to constitute a list to give power to the assembly, a list entitled *Let's Live and Decide Together*. Following its mandate, the list's sole electoral commitment was to transfer institutional power to the CCA by linking the elected people's mandate to the decisions of the assembly.

During the campaign, there was an intense and in-depth reflection by the list on the role of the assembly in the event of a victory. This was represented most notably through the elaboration of a Local Constitution that would institutionalise the assembly, give it a role and operating rules, as well as consider its relation to the city council if the list were to win the elections. As such, since direct democracy was the participants' unique electoral claim, the Local Constitution was the concrete political program that the list proposed to the population. At the same time, the list also organised assemblies and distributed questionnaires to develop propositions for their leaflet campaigns that would reflect the needs of the population, held electoral assemblies to explain the project and sign a charter of commitment for elected officials and met twice a week to organise the campaign.

In the end, the list suffered an electoral defeat in the first round of municipal elections on 15 March 2020 with 9.76 percent of the votes. Coming just shy of the 10 percent threshold, it failed to qualify for the second round by only four votes, but nevertheless

arrived before the far-right list *Rassemblement National*. For the participants in the list, the failure in the municipal elections, combined with the lock-down due to the Covid-19 pandemic imposed the day after the elections, have put an important brake on this direct democracy project in Commercy[10].

3. Direct democracy vs representative democracy: a dialectical relationship

From the shack to the municipal elections campaign, participants in the direct democracy experiment in Commercy have struggled to bring about direct democracy, that is, to give power to the assembled people of the municipality. Despite the coherence of this political project, the case-study rests on a fundamental tension: that of experimenting direct democracy under the form of assembly as a way out of the crisis of representative democracy; that of using representative democracy to establish direct democracy by giving power to the assembly. This tension is not new and has been encountered by other movements emerging from the street and choosing to engage in electoralism. They too have faced "the apparently conflicting demands of advocating direct (anti-representational) forms of politics whilst engaging in representational politics in order to promote them" (Ordóñez et al., 2018: 86). This section explores this tension by analysing its terms successively.

3.1. Direct democracy against representative democracy: building power into the assembly as a rejection of representative politics

[10] The aftermath of the elections will not be addressed, as the article focuses on the electoral strategy.

Criticism of representative democracy and traditional hierarchical forms of organisation is the bedrock of the national Yellow Vests movement (Bedock et al., 2020), as is the case of other contemporary social movements struggling for direct democracy such as Occupy, the *Indignados* or *Nuit Debout*. However, this dismissal of vertical models need not be equated with that "of all organizational and institutional forms" (Hardt and Negri, 2017: 6). This section studies the organisational and institutional form created by the Yellow Vests of Commercy to remedy the crisis of representative democracy: that of the assembly.

Since the beginning of the Yellow Vests movement, the assembly was quickly and everywhere constituted as the privileged form of concrete political organisation. Several causes explain the hegemony of the assembly form in the movement. First, the assembly model has been a success over the last fifty years in enabling criticism of traditional political representation (Jeanpierre, 2019). By preventing leaders to capture decision-making power, assemblies give a voice to each participant, "ensures the broadest expression" and allows to legitimise collective choices (Jeanpierre, 2019). In the same vein, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri claim that "hierarchical structures have been overturned and dismantled within the movements as a function of both the crisis of representation and a deep aspiration to democracy" (2017: 8). Moreover, the assembly combines two advantages, that of allowing "the expression of individual singularities" and that of "the mass effect" demonstrating collective power. Assemblies also have an educational role in the sense that they are like "popular universities where public problems are translated and questions of general interest are discussed in a more accessible language" (Jeanpierre, 2019: 157-160).

If the local assembly was preferred as a form of organisation, and if existing mechanisms of local democracy were not used by the Yellow Vests as tools of struggle, this is in part because they saw the latter as detached from lived experience. In contrast, the assembly form responds to the critique of political abstraction by providing mechanisms to directly engage the population. In Commercy, the assemblies spontaneously created on roundabouts were rooted in a desire for sociability. This proposed answer to the crisis of representative democracy constitutes "a positive demand to re-anchor discourses and practices qualified as political in the shared social substratum of everyday life and, even more radically, a demand for the submission of politics to ordinary experience" (Jeanpierre, 2019: 161-162).

In Commercy, this desire to anchor democratic mechanisms in lived experience is reflected in the daily GAs that the Yellow Vests had at their shack: a place to live and meet on a daily basis, but also to debate and make decisions. These practices of direct democracy in the assembly—one person/one voice, equality in speech, legitimisation of choices by the assembly and absence of leaders—arose informally and were enabled by the shack, the relationships created there and the forms of socialisation it sheltered. What the shack made possible was therefore no less than the sharing of experiences of living and working conditions, which would serve as a starting point for other discussions in assembly, thereby fusing daily and political life. Moreover, the practice of the assembly in this space was seen as one activity among others, alongside making coffee, welcoming newcomers, socialising, sharing experiences, demonstrating and organising solidarity

activities as well as the daily reproduction of the place. The assembly was therefore not an isolated event, but integral to the everyday activity of living together with others.

In the building of the assembly, the municipal government was first seen by the movement as "a central front line in the fight between the Yellow Vests and the executive" (Jeanpierre, 2019) and the mayor was considered a "relay of Macron", as stated by a Commercy participant during the first Assembly of assemblies. While representative government at the state level—the president, government and parliament—was considered by the movement to be an unaccountable elite, separate from the rest of the population and dominating it, so was the representative government at the local level—the mayor and city council. When representative democracy was criticised by the Yellow Vests, it was therefore at all levels of power. This criticism of municipal power was reinforced in Commercy by the constant hostility of the mayor towards the movement, which reached its climax when he ordered the destruction of the shack despite the democratic mobilisation.

However, what the destruction of the shack pushed the participants to do is to explore how the assembly it nurtured during several weeks could have a life of its own. Disembodied from any shared daily experience and deprived of a place from which to *build* its power, the assembly shifted towards the project of *conquering* power. This perspective connects to the conception of democracy as "the rule of the assembly," that is, as a system of governance where power is exercised by the assembly. Indeed, in Daniela Cammack's (2019) account of the original meaning of *demokratia*, traditionally interpreted as "power to the people," the term *demos* does not actually refer to the people,

but the assembly. Her core finding is that the establishment of *demokratia* as the political organisation of Ancient Athens does not come from the creation of the assembly, as it already existed without having power (Cammack, 2019: 60). Rather, it refers to the reversal of the balance of power between the assembly—defined as "the singular collective agent formed by the common people meeting for political purposes"—and the political elite—that is, those who influence political decisions as individuals and not as members of the mass (Cammack, 2019: 53-54). At that moment, the institution of the common people that is the assembly "became the supreme political body" and achieved *kratos* by having "the final decision-making power" (Cammack, 2019: 60). To establish *demokratia* as the rule of the assembly, and to give final decision-making power to the assembly, the movement decided to conquer city hall by adopting a libertarian municipalist electoral strategy, that is, by using representative democracy to realise direct democracy. Let us now turn towards the analysis of this strategy to engage with existing institutions, and the tensions and limits it encountered in so doing.

3.2. Direct democracy through representative democracy: using representative tools to give power to the assembly

3.2.1. To engaging or not to engage with existing institutions? Tensions surrounding the electoral strategy

As for any grassroots democratic innovation, the key question is "whether, to what extent and in what ways democratic experiments should involve the representative institutions" (della Porta & Felicetti, 2022: 75) and whether they had the capacity "to institutionalise this 'alternative order'" (Bayirbag et al., 2017: 2034). In this case, the choice of presenting a list to the municipal elections to give power to the assembly was partly due to the

exhaustion of other forms of political actions (della Porta, 2020: 156). It was also linked with the fact that the Yellow Vests of Commercy had "overarching systemic concerns" (Felicetti, 2021: 1595). Indeed, they were constantly animated by the will to change the system from representative democracy to direct democracy, as evidenced by the preamble of their local constitution stating "the need to break with the representative system, to return to a direct and permanent democracy". The emergence of their practice of assembly out of the local struggle meant by no means a restriction of the scope of the change they were calling for. Rather it demonstrates the awareness they developed during the Yellow Vests struggle that the only institution they could potentially transform was the local one.

This choice was not obvious. As developed earlier, city hall was one of the main obstacles to the direct democracy project of the Commercy Yellow Vests –epitomised by the mayor's crucial declaration "it is not the people of Commercy who decide". But the movement used this animosity from the mayor as a springboard to stimulate their project of direct democracy. Previously seen as the enemy of direct democracy, city hall became an institution to conquer to allow the people of Commercy to, precisely, decide. In the wake of Yellow Vests's endeavour to relocalise politics (Jeanpierre, 2019), the seizure of power in a local representative institution was conceived as a strategy to bring about direct democracy in the form of assemblies through a radical restructuring of this institution. And as such, this is what motivated the movement to adopt an electoral libertarian municipalist strategy and to present a list to the elections to give the power to the people of Commercy through the CCA.

However, the question of "municipalism," understood by participants as the strategy to present a list to the municipal elections to give power to the CCA, was not uncontroversial. It marked the split of the Commercy Yellow Vests group[11]. Though its cleavage began with the destruction of the shack and the subsequent crystallisation of tensions, it became definitive with the decision of the CCA to present a list at the municipal elections.

On the one hand, according to the "anti-municipalists," and in the words of a female Yellow Vests during the group interview, the electoral project was considered to be "non-yellow vest" and an "already-crafted" project, a "path too traced," "imposed by people who have worked on it, but that was not realised with the Yellow Vests." Under this view, the Yellow Vests struggle was against "the system as a whole" and "taking up the scheme that is already established while we are trying to fight our way out of it" would not be conducive to replacing it[12].

On the other hand, for the "pro-municipalists," this strategy was in fact the logical continuation of the direct democracy project practiced by the Yellow Vests. Indeed, as one male participant put it during the group interview:

> The political outlet of the Yellow Vests is the citizens' assembly. I'm not talking about elections, it's to make assemblies like we tried to do so that people express their needs, their desires, their ideas and make their own proposals, and don't wait for people above to make them . . . if we

[11] The description of the view of two sides of the group is translated from Van Outryve (2023).
[12] While the "pro-municipalists" engaged in the studied electoral project, the "anti-municipalists" continued to participate in demonstrations in larger cities and to occupy roundabouts.

> presented a list, it wasn't to say vote for us . . . it was to say if you vote for us, we won't do anything, we'll execute the decisions of the Citizens' Assembly.

In this view, far from continuing the established pattern, the project of giving power to the Citizens' Assembly was aimed precisely at subverting representative democracy by replacing it with direct democracy. As such, it constituted an answer to the representative democracy crisis. Moreover, this project also came from the realisation that mobilisations, demonstrations and other occupations of public space by the Yellow Vests, whether at the local or national level, had not succeeded in changing the representative system, and that another strategy was therefore needed.

This split testifies to the democratic nature of the decision to adopt the electoral strategy. Not only was the separation of the group materialised by a vote among the remainder of the Yellow Vests participants, who decided by a majority, including pro-municipalists, to no longer speak of "municipalism" during their assemblies as it was too controversial and conflictual. But the decision to present a list for municipal elections was not made by a leader, but by participants in the September 2019 CCA. This contrasts with traditional vertical forms of organisation, where leaders are responsible for strategy and the movement for tactics, and answers Hardt and Negri's call to do the converse (2017). Indeed, they defend the capacity of movements to take such strategic decisions: "What if democratic, horizontal social movements were developing the ability to grasp the entire social field and craft lasting political projects?" (Hardt and Negri, 2017: 18). As such, CCA's participants made the strategic decision to give a mandate to a group among them to create a list and make the tactical decisions during the campaign. As will be shown, this division between strategy and tactics will impact the existence of the assembly itself.

3.2.2. The limits of the electoral strategy

The literature has highlighted the risks municipalist movements run when succeeding in electoralism: the creation of a hierarchy between representatives and represented; the erosion of horizontal values; the decline of the mobilisation; the loss of confidence in transformative social change; the marginalisation of radical voices; the accommodation to neoliberal and austerity governance; the financial limitations; the lack of competences; the administrative and institutional opposition; the interference of regional and national government; the hostility of the media (Ordóñez et al., 2018: 93-95; Janoschka and Mota, 2021; Blanco et al., 2020; Feenstra and Tormey, 2022). As the list has not succeeded on this electoral path, it is not possible to evaluate whether these risks have materialised in Commercy. However, what can be learned from this experience is the limits a movement for direct democracy encounters when engaging in an electoral strategy and having to use the paradigmatic tool of representative democracy, the elections, as well as the effects such a decision has on the movement itself. I explain here three limits that the case-study has revealed about such a strategy.

A first limit the movement has encountered is that the format of representative democracy that is the electoral campaign affects the very existence of the organisational form of direct democracy, the assembly. In Commercy, the CCA had a significantly reduced role during the campaign. This was due to the fact that the assembly did not have sufficient internal resources to maintain its own existence outside of the electoral endeavour and to carry out projects of its own. Indeed, following the attribution of tactics to the list and strategy to the assembly, most active participants entered the list once the strategy was

decided upon. That group focused its limited energy on a campaign that demanded not only to engage with traditional promoting and communication activities to gain the population's suffrage, but also to develop in a coherent and credible way the radically new project of direct democracy proposed to the town. This led to the fact that, when an assembly was held, it was dominated by the electoral narrative and dedicated to the electoral project, as was the case of other municipalist movements (Weaver, 2018). According to participants, the assembly had almost no existence of its own during the campaign. Adopting the electoral strategy forces to submit to the constraints of representative politics (forming a list and its internal order, developing a programme, campaigning, distributing leaflets, meeting the population), which does not enable to develop the vehicle of direct democracy—the assembly— especially if there is no division of forces among the two connected, albeit separate, projects.

But the reduced role of the assembly was also linked to tactical decisions made by the list. Indeed, as the assembly was open to all, it seemed absurd to the list members that people coming to the assembly for the first time (even political opponents such as the mayor) could refuse the list's work. Such a choice was for example made when the list decided not to organise an assembly to report on the progress of the campaign and validate the composition of the list, the proposals of the campaign and the Local Constitution. This choice was motivated by a desire to prevent the project from being destroyed from the outside before it could be born. In the eyes of participants, it was also justified by the legitimacy that the elections would confer on the list's work should it be elected.

This raises questions about the nature of the power of the assembly. Participants in the CCA mandated the list to run for the elections. However, it was interpreted by the members of the list as a "single mandate," which did not require further oversight by the assembly. This is justified by the fact that the mandate was given for a specific strategy chosen by the assembly—presenting a list for election to give power to the assembly—and therefore provided the list with the legitimacy to undertake tactical steps in that direction until its end. The task of validating the system of direct democracy developed by the list in the local constitution was left to the elections, the results of which would give the list and its proposals the legitimacy to be carried out (Van Outryve, 2023). Indeed, in the official leaflet of the list distributed at the end of the campaign, it was stated "Our list proposes to you DIRECT DEMOCRACY: no important decision will be made without the approval of the people of Commercy." In this sense, even if the list clearly used the tool of representative democracy—the elections— to legitimise their project, people who voted for the list were aware that they were voting for the establishment of direct democracy.

A second limit experienced by the movement when engaging in this strategy is that the timing of representative democracy—a 6-years periodicity in this case—constraints the stage of development of the direct democracy vehicle. Indeed, the question of the prior existence of the assembly and its degree of development before going to elections constitutes a strategic node for any municipalist movement so that its existence is not stifled by the electoral campaign. If the movement wins, the assembly will need to have already engaged in a collective learning process to deliberate, make decisions and hold their delegates accountable (Van Outryve, 2019), a capacity anaesthetized by centuries of

representative democracy (Stasavage, 2020). Should the movement lose, the assembly will need to have functioned throughout the campaign to have an existence of its own, independent of elections, so that a failure at this endeavour does not lead to its extinction. Whether it meets an electoral success or not, it appears important to develop the assembly as an independent and autonomous institution so that it has developed a culture of strong directly democratic decision-making and that its existence does not depend on the outcome of the elections.

In the case of Commercy, the choice to present the assembly to the elections at this stage of development was justified by its timing. The municipal elections were fast approaching, and the next opportunity would not come until six years later, with no certainty that the movement would hold until then. For the Yellow Vests who believed in the importance of giving power to the assembly, it was a question of transforming a movement that was beginning to lag, into a political project of direct democracy, which many saw as a continuation of the Yellow Vests experiment. Despite the fact that the assembly was not sufficiently autonomous and risked being monopolised by the electoral campaign, the strategic decision to run for the municipal elections was a chance to institutionalise the direct democracy project and avoid its evaporation. Indeed, if a movement waits for too long before running for elections—should they adopt such a strategy—people might not see the point of participating in an assembly without real decision-making power. This can lead them to stop attending, emptying the assembly of its substance. However, looking back on the campaign, participants deemed that the assembly should have already developed "concrete projects" in order to be known and "credible" in the eyes of the population—both expressions being encountered in a

majority of interviews held after the municipal elections. As such, it appears the assembly was not sufficiently developed to survive the elections.

This case-study highlighted a third limit that the list did not directly experience, but that pertained to the hypothetical problems that it could have encountered in case of success. Participants nevertheless attempted to answer it during pre-electoral discussions. It concerns the personalist nature of representative government which is at odds with the collective character of direct democracy, and the accountability mechanism needed to enable the transfer of power from the elected people to the assembly. According to the trustee, or independence, vision of representation dominant in representative government, by contrast to the mandate one, elections provide the elected person with a mandate to exercise public power for a given time and entrust her to use her judgment in doing so (Pitkin, 1967). As such, there is no possibility of recall, apart from a lack of re-election. Throughout France, the Yellow Vests have rejected this conception of representation and asked to reinvent it so that representatives are controllable, behave as spokespeople of the population, and stand in proximity, both statutorily and geographically, to the people (Bedock et al., 2020). This vision of representation carried by the national movement seems close to that of Commercy's participants, despite the fact that the latter wanted to go beyond renovating representative democracy by replacing it with direct democracy. Indeed, as a participant, acquainted with libertarian municipalism, puts it, the project is to make locally elected people "simple spokespersons" for the assembly's decisions:

> The local elected official is not a leader, but a delegate of the base. The pyramid is inverted! The mayor is no longer a man of power who will impose his power, who will be a transmission channel

> from the state to the people, but rather the opposite, his defender, his spokesperson, who puts himself at the service of the citizen's assembly (cited in Gourgues, 2020).

However, the implementation of such a vision of the elected person as a delegate in the framework of representative democracy lacks concrete mechanisms. While the Yellow Vests of Commercy spoke of imperative and recallable mandates in their call to the other Yellow Vests of France, the list no longer referred to these devices as the legal framework does not allow them. The notion of imperative mandate is however implicit in the text of the "Charter of the elected person" to which each member of the list committed during a public assembly on 22 February 2020 in Commercy. The Charter stipulates that the assembly should not be merely "consulted," but should "receive a deliberation and decision power to which the elected people should submit". By signing the charter, the potential elected people would "commit to transfer the municipal decision-making power to the whole citizenry of Commercy." This crucial article is found in the Charter—the text signed individually by each member of the list—and not in the Local Constitution—the collective foundational text of the assembly—because it involves the individual commitment of each list member to respect the project of giving power to the assembly. This is because the framework in which this project was advanced, that of representative democracy, only allows power to be conferred upon individuals running for elections, and not to an entity such as the assembly. However, the corollary of the imperative mandate, recall, is harder to enforce without legal avenues[13]. In interviews, several list members considered that, should an elected person from the list not implement a decision of the assembly, he or she should resign, constituting a system of recall based on a moral

[13] Nationally, the recall referendum constitutes one of the demands of the Yellow Vests (Bedock et al., 2020: 235).

commitment. The lack of legal mechanism, testifying the refusal of representative government to be controlled by the population during its rule, demonstrates the difficulty to use representative democracy in order to bring about direct democracy, but also the political imagination of libertarian municipalist movements nevertheless choosing the electoral strategy.

Conclusion

This article traces the evolution of the assembly direct democracy experiment in Commercy, from the 2018 Yellow Vests movement to the 2020 municipal elections. After functioning in assemblies to counter the logic of the representative government, part of the Yellow Vests group shifted towards a libertarian municipalist strategy, understood as the use of the municipal elections to give power to the assembly. As such, representative democracy acts both as a negative trigger for creating forms of direct democracy that counter its intrinsic logic and as a tool for institutionalising them. This dual relationship between representative and direct democracy reveals the fundamental tension the case rests on: that of experimenting direct democracy under the form of assembly as a way out of the crisis of representative democracy; that of using representative democracy in order to establish direct democracy by giving power to the assembly. This tension is materialised in the limits the movement encounters when using the paradigmatic tool of representative democracy, the elections. In Commercy, these limits are 1) the nature of the electoral campaign affecting the very existence of the assembly; 2) the timing of representative democracy constraining the development of the assembly, and therefore its survival; 3) the opposition between the personalist nature of elections and the accountability mechanism the collective character of direct democracy requires. Focusing

on the limits of engaging in an electoral strategy on the group need not discourage other movements from exploring this path, but rather make them aware of the pitfalls they might encountered based on other movements' experience, as well as inspire them with the solutions they developed. This would hopefully make them more prepared to face these obstacles in their project to replace representative democracy with direct democracy, and develop their political imagination in so doing.

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