Mattering at the periphery

Geographies of peri-urban life and its discontents

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Abstract
Amidst growing social unrest in the peripheries of Western European economies, this thesis investigates the lived experiences of those inhabiting "places that don't matter." Focusing on Yellow Vests activists in France, the thesis addresses the socio-political grievances and aspirations of peri-urban inhabitants, seeking to understand the complex fabric of peri-urban life and politics. This is done through an investigation of how Yellow Vests protesters navigate, challenge, and reshape their lived realities, focusing on the experiences, contestations and transformations that characterise the experiential and socio-political landscape of peri-urban life.

Based on a Lefebvrian-inspired critical phenomenological approach, this research engages ethnographically with the lives lived in French peri-urban peripheries, intertwining an understanding of subjectivities with a critical awareness of socio-spatial structures that shape and constrain lived experiences. Alongside economic hardships and political marginalisation, the thesis qualifies how peri-urban socio-spatial challenges are compounded by a scarcity of opportunities for meaningful encounters, exacerbating experiences of isolation and marginalisation. The thesis also highlights the agency of peri-urban inhabitants in challenging such experiential condition, exemplified by the Yellow Vests' alternative politics of encounter, as they strive to contest and redefine the fabric of their peri-urban lived realities in the everyday.

Exploring what it means to live in peri-urban peripheries and how they are experienced by those inhabiting them, this thesis offers insights into the multifaceted impacts of urbanisation on people's lives and the discontents this may engender. It complements inquiries into geographies of discontent and "left-behind places" by highlighting peri-urban inhabitants' aspirations to matter at the periphery. The thesis suggests that peripheries should be conceptualised as involving a spectrum of lived experiences and bring them into focus to address the discontent and uncertainty surrounding their political futures.

Key words left-behind places, discontent, peri-urban, lived experience, everyday life, encounter, critical phenomenology

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à Marcel
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Résumé

Les Oubliés de la périphérie:
Géographies de la vie périurbaine et de ses mécontentements

Au cœur des mouvements sociaux qui agitent les périphéries des centres urbains d'Europe occidentale, cette thèse se penche sur les expériences vécues par ceux qui résident dans les "lieux délaissés." En se concentrant sur les Gilets Jaunes en France, elle explore les expériences et les luttes spécifiques qui ont conduit à leurs protestations passées et actuelles, mettant en lumière une vie perçue comme marginale dans les zones périurbaines, éloignée de l'attention des élites politiques et de la société.

À travers son approche ethnographique, la thèse examine les réalités socio-spatiales vécues, les frustrations et les aspirations des habitants périurbains. Dans le but de saisir la complexité de la vie et de la politique périurbaines, cette recherche offre ainsi un éclairage sur l'isolation et la marginalisation de ceux qui vivent en marge des "lieux qui comptent" (*places that matter*). Elle analyse en particulier comment ces mécontentements découlent du manque d'opportunités de rencontres et de construction de liens sociaux, aggravant l'aliénation des habitants dans leur quotidien et leurs mobilités, et les confrontant à des expériences de solitude. En examinant également leurs initiatives politiques alternatives, cette recherche souligne la capacité des habitants périurbains incarnés par les Giles Jaunes de contester et de redéfinir leurs réalités vécues.

Par une approche phénoménologique critique de la vie périurbaine, cette étude explore ce que signifie de vivre dans les périphéries périurbaines. Elle éclaire les multiples impacts de l'urbanisation sur la vie des individus et les mécontentements qu'elle peut engendrer. Elle complète les géographies du mécontentement et les enquêtes sur les "lieux délaissés" (*left behind*), suggérant que les périphéries devraient être conceptualisées comme impliquant un spectre d'expériences vécues et nécessaire pour aborder le mécontentement et l'incertitude entourant leurs futurs politiques.

Abstract

Amidst growing social unrest in the peripheries of Western European economies, this thesis investigates the lived experiences of those inhabiting "places that don't matter." Focusing on Yellow Vests activists in France, the thesis addresses the socio-political grievances and aspirations of peri-urban inhabitants, seeking to understand the complex fabric of peri-urban life and politics. This is done through an investigation of how Yellow Vests protesters navigate, challenge, and reshape their lived realities, focusing on the experiences, contestations and transformations that characterise the experiential and socio-political landscape of peri-urban life.

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Heureux qui comme Ulysse a fait un beau voyage…

Happy is one, like Ulysses, who made a magnificent journey… (Du Bellay, 1558)

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throughout this journey. I am profoundly grateful for the unwavering support of my friend Noémie Ranson. From our six-hour-long FaceTime calls during the solitary times of the pandemic to her regular reminders that it was okay if I ever felt like giving up, her encouragement has been a source of strength. I also extend my gratitude to Valérie Milaire for helping me getting through this journey and allowing me to embrace the challenges I faced and grow at peace with myself and my path. Finally, none of this would have been possible without the support of Catherine Briat, my mother, who always believed in me. Today, at the culmination of this journey, I am deeply grateful for her love and guidance, which have helped me navigate through challenges and find confidence in the path ahead.

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Tack för allt.

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Introduction

> Spans of time are often named after the social trends that define them: the gilded age, the roaring twenties, the lost decade, and so on. For the period from 2008 to the present, it would be difficult to find a better title than "the age of discontent."
>
> – Rhodes-Purdy et al. (2023, p.4)

Welcome to the "age of discontent." For Rhodes-Purdy et al. (2023), the era we are currently navigating is one marked by a global rise in dissent, protest voting, and social unrest, reflecting deep-seated dissatisfactions with the current state of affairs. Often rooted in geographical disparities in opportunity, access, and representation between metropoles and "the rest," this discontent has catalysed a series of movements across Western Europe and bolstered populist sentiments. This is exemplified by the unforeseen outcome of the Brexit vote, the sudden rise of the French Yellow Vests, and disruptive farmers' demonstrations in France, the Netherlands, Germany, and other countries.

These developments have set off a proliferation of scholarly work aimed at understanding European *geographies of discontent* – what fuels such discontent, what spaces it emerges from, and their implications for policy-making – addressing the complex interplay between space, politics, economic and social inequalities. Labelled "left-behind" areas (Pike et al., 2023), or "places that don't matter"(Rodríguez-Pose, 2018), such spaces lie on the socio-economic peripheries of Western Europe's urban centres, eclipsed by the affluence and influence of metropolitan hubs and globalised dynamics. Spanning peri-urban and rural landscapes, these peripheries are marked by economic stagnation and face significant socio-economic and infrastructural challenges, as well as political marginalisation. These challenges are seen as focal points for understanding important aspects of our "age of discontent."

While scholars have extensively mapped the socio-economic and political contours of "left-behind" areas (e.g. MacKinnon et al., 2022, 2024; McKay,

2019; Rodrigues Posé et al., 2023; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018; Sykes, 2018), the integration of experiential and emotional aspects into this scholarship is still relatively nascent (see Hannemann et al., 2023). This underscores a growing acknowledgement of the significance of subjective dimensions in the understanding of peripheries, particularly through the perspectives of their inhabitants. An integration of such dimensions could enhance our grasp of the "geographical etymology" (Pike et al., 2023) of "left-behind" areas and their discontents, which could inform both academic and political debates.

To this extent, this thesis addresses the lived experiences of communities inhabiting French peri-urban peripheries; and inquires how experiences might be at the root of discontent and efforts to "matter" in "places that don't matter." It does so by focusing on the French Yellow Vests movement, which emerged in 2018 as an expression of discontent stemming from peri-urban areas. By occupying roundabouts, the Yellow Vests strategically chose sites that symbolized their grievances and peri-urban condition (Depraz, 2019b, 2019a; Robbers, 2020; Fourquet, 2020; Galland, 2018). On these peri-urban roundabouts, they expressed their frustration with decision makers and urban elites who "didn't understand what [their] life was like," as one protester expressed in a televised interview aired at the time (BFMTV, 2019). The articulation of these grievances became a significant manifestation of distinct experiences contingent to a life lived at and in the French peri-urban periphery.

Peri-urban life emerges here as a critical setting for the discontent and protests symbolized by the Yellow Vests protesters. Located at the periphery of cities, peri-urban areas encapsulate ever-changing dynamics of urbanisation, and are often caught between urban expectations and rural realities. Living in such areas involves facing distinct challenges that exacerbate experiences of marginalisation and neglect. Indeed, scholars contend that the peri-urban constitutes a key arena where unequal impacts of urbanisation are vividly expressed and experienced, and where the complexities of contemporary socio-spatial changes are manifested and can be observed both in French society (Charmes, 2020; Guilluy, 2014; Marchal & Stébé, 2018), and beyond (Benoit, 2019; Cobbinah & Amoako, 2012; Follmann, 2022; Marshall et al., 2018; Nilsson et al., 2013; Piorr et al., 2011; Sahana et al., 2023). Peri-urban France is commonly associated with visual unattractiveness and unpleasant experiences, earning labels such as the "ugly France" (De Jarcy & Remy, 2010; El Haïk-Wagner, 2020), and further involving spaces of social relegation due to adverse effects of globalisation (Charmes, 2017; Guilluy, 2014, 2018a).

Termed the "revolution of roundabouts" (Aubenas, 2018), the 2018 Yellow Vests movement unveiled distinct spatial dynamics and experiences related to their peri-urban spatiality. Across the country, these traffic nodes became meeting grounds where protesters from diverse backgrounds and locations encountered one another, uniting around shared experiences and donning high visibility jackets as a representation of their collective identity and aspirations. These encounters not only allowed them to voice their lived experiences of socio-spatial inequalities, but also aimed at instigating transformative change in those experiences as they fostered new politics and a sense of belonging (see Aubenas, 2018; Bernard de Raymond & Bordiec, 2020; Blavier & Walker, 2020; Bonin & Liochon, 2022; Misset & Poullaouec, 2019). In other words, the Yellow Vests' roundabout occupations went beyond expressing grievances and contestations; they became an empowering force to catalyse transformations of lived experiences and marginalisation in the peri-urban peripheries. Their protests became a symbol of resilience, a collective effort for protesters to "matter at the periphery" and to collectively reshape the narrative of their lives and challenge systemic socio-spatial inequalities.

Mattering at the periphery: experiencing, contesting, and transforming peri-urban life

Encountering each other on roundabouts, the French Yellow Vests claimed their lives not to be understood and marginalised, thereby prompting this research to investigate peri-urban life and its distinct experiences and struggles, and how such life may root their discontent. Embodied by Yellow Vest protesters, the thesis examines the experiential "matter" of the daily lives of peri-urban inhabitants, explores their potential to contest these experiences, and probes their possibilities for collective agency in reshaping their everyday lives in the production of the peri-urban space. Exploring what it means to live in and at the periphery of "places that matter," the thesis to this end addresses the following research question:

How is peri-urban life lived, and how is it experienced, contested, and transformed by those living it?

To address this question, the thesis adopts an approach that is sensitive to the world as lived. It delves into the experiential matter of the peri-urban, giving voice to subjective realities capturing nuanced ways in which those living in peri-urban peripheries may negotiate their identities, navigate their environments, and articulate their dissatisfactions.

Drawing on Lefebvrian-inspired critical phenomenological approaches and emerging scholarship on *geographies of embodiment* (e.g. Simonsen & Koefoed, 2020) and related *geographies of encounter* (e.g. Koefoed et al., 2022; Leitner, 2012; Matejskova & Leitner, 2011; Merrifield, 2013; Simonsen et al., 2017), the research explores how individuals may navigate and challenge peri-urban life and its production, taking into account their embodied experiences, emotions, and perceptions. Inspired by Henri Lefebvre (1974/1991), I approach peri-urban life as a *lived* space, as dynamically experienced, contested and transformed. Along with the critical phenomenological emphasis on experiences and agency of individuals, this approach allows for researching nuanced and dynamic realities of peri-urban life and its politics. This focus further aligns with the recent developments in cultural geographies (e.g. Anderson, 2021; Geoghegan, 2016), feminist geographies (e.g. Mohanty, 1998, 2003; Women and Geography Study Group, 2013), and political geographies (e.g. Feinberg et al., 2017; Smith, 2020), which recognize the importance of experience and perception as "ways of knowing, being and doing" (Anderson & Smith, 2001, p.8), fostering a holistic and socially aware perspective.

Approaching peri-urban life as experienced, contested, and transformed, this research pays specific attention to *encounters*, both as a concept and as tangible interactions. It explores how various types of encounters may serve as catalysts for articulating and amplifying grievances within peri-urban contexts; and addresses how encounters – whether planned or spontaneous, peaceful or contentious – contribute to the shaping of Yellow Vests protesters' collective identity and drive their collective action. In doing so, the study investigates spaces where such encounters occur and the dynamics they foster. By focusing on encounters, I seek to illuminate the relational aspects of peri-urban discontents, illustrating how the protesters' shared experiences and interactions contribute to a collective understanding and response to their marginalisation. This perspective emphasises encounters as instrumental in voicing dissent, but also as pivotal for understanding the fabric of peri-urban experiences and the construction of new forms of solidarity and social ties. In essence, encounters are approached as processes through which peri-urban inhabitants experience, express and redefine their place within the peri-urban fabric, challenging preconceived and dominant narratives of the periphery and ultimately how they matter within it.

By emphasising the experiential dimension of peri-urban life, the thesis allocates less attention to other important facets that are worth noting here. This is the case for class dynamics, which may further influence the social fabric and the

experience of those living in and at the periphery (e.g. Gingue, 2018; Guilluy, 2014, 2019; Kühn, 2015; Naumann & Fischer-Tahir, 2013; Zwęglińska-Gałecka, 2023). It is undeniable that class intersects with peri-urban issues to create distinct experiences of marginalisation. Similarly, the concepts of spatial justice and recognition, although touched upon in this thesis, remain critical elements in understanding peri-urban discontents and calls for further exploration (e.g. Eriksson & Tollefsen, 2022; Van Vulpen, 2023; Van Vulpen & Bock, 2020). Other significant factors that may condition peri-urban life include environmental sustainability (e.g. Häyrynen & Hämeenaho, 2020; Vale et al., 2023), the impact of technological advancements (e.g. Calignano, 2022; Makkonen et al., 2020; Munro, 2019; Pugh et al., 2023), and the global economic forces that shape local realities. Such dimensions influence lived experiences, contestations, and transformations of peri-urban spaces by those who inhabit them, and continued investigation is required to appreciate the breadth and depth of the peri-urban experience and the discontents of a life at the periphery.

Complementing left-behind and peri-urban geographies with experience

By exploring how peri-urban life is experienced, contested, and transformed by those living it, this thesis illuminates intricate socio-spatial processes, challenges, and influences that shape the lived realities experienced by peri-urban inhabitants. It also addresses broader concerns regarding discontents emanating from peripheries at the margins of globalised dynamics and their benefits. This complements current research on Western European peripheries and the associated discontent by integrating a focus on lived experiences. Through the empirical lens of the Yellow Vests, this research helps to illustrate and conceptualize the aspirations and grievances of communities inhabiting these peripheries, offering insights that can complement ongoing research on *geographies of discontent* as well as broader inquiries about "left-behind" or "places that don't matter" and the diverse demands, contexts and experiences they evoke (De Ruyter et al., 2021; Dijkstra et al., 2020; Hannemann et al., 2023; MacKinnon et al., 2022a; McCann, 2020; McKay et al., 2023; Pike et al., 2023, 2023; Rodrigues Posé et al., 2023; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018).

Insights of the thesis are further relevant within the contemporary socio-political European context marked by discontent, particularly as the experiences of those living at the periphery of urban and economic development arise against

dominant economic and political discourses. These experiences are increasingly shaping political narratives, feeding into the rise and normalisation of populist sentiments, which in turn bolster far-right political agendas (e.g. Bory, 2022; Bourdin & Torre, 2023; De Ruyter et al., 2021; McKay et al., 2023). Populist platforms have indeed increasingly drawn strength from the frustrations of those who feel ignored by the mainstream socio-political establishment (Rhodes-Purdy et al., 2023). This underscores the need to understand experiential dimensions of discontent emerging from peripheral areas (e.g. Mamonova & Franquesa, 2020; Piketty & Cagé, 2023; Urso et al., 2023), and supports a shift in perspective that sees peri-urban areas as key arenas that require thoughtful scholarly and political engagement.

Moreover, by exploring the peri-urban, this research adds on to the growing recognition of "new urban spaces" (Brenner, 2019) that defy traditional analytical binaries such as urban/rural and centre/periphery (see Ahani & Dadashpoor, 2021; Nilsson et al., 2013; Piorr et al., 2011; Ravetz et al., 2013; Sahana et al., 2023; Žlender, 2021). Far from being an exception or anomaly, the peri-urban is a complex and hybrid space that continues to be the subject of ongoing scholarly debates and requires further examination to understand its characteristics, dynamics and experiences (e.g. Charmes, 2017, 2020; Cusin et al., 2016; Girard, 2019; Haran et al., 2018; Marchal & Stébé, 2018; Nilsson et al., 2013; Sahana et al., 2023). Leveraging insights from critical urban geography (Benoit, 2019; Biagi, 2020; Brenner, 2019), and specifically French peri-urban research (Charmes, 2017, 2020; Cusin et al., 2016; Depraz, 2017; Marchal & Stébé, 2013; 2018), this thesis adds to the evolving field of peri-urban geography and the discourse surrounding how such space may be experienced amid urbanisation dynamics and the socio-spatial and economic inequalities it engenders, in and beyond France (e.g. Biegańska et al., 2018; Follmann, 2022; Marshall et al., 2018; Nilsson et al., 2013; Sahana et al., 2023).

Structure

The thesis is organized into three parts, each addressing overarching elements of the study of peri-urban life and its discontents in the French context through the lens of the Yellow Vests protests.

Part I opens by contextualising the multifaceted landscape of peri-urban life and its contestation by the Yellow Vests within broader socio-political and scholarly narratives. Chapter 1 introduces the Yellow Vests movement within the broader phenomenon of peripheral contestations, and discusses the intersection of this

empirical case with the emerging research interest in geographies of discontent. Chapter 2 shifts the focus to the context of the French peri-urban and delves into the literature that specifically addresses its conceptualisations and the socio-economic and experiential dynamics it may invoke.

Part II establishes the thesis' theoretical, conceptual, and methodological frameworks. Chapter 3 develops the theoretical framework, which combines Lefebvrian and critical phenomenological perspectives to approach peri-urban life as a "lived" entity that is dynamically experienced, contested and transformed by its inhabitants. Chapter 4 then bridges theory and empirics by introducing the concept of *encounter* to operationalise my theoretical framework and qualify such process. Finally, Chapter 5 addresses the methodology and ethnographic approach employed to empirically engage with the lived experiences of peri-urban inhabitants.

Part III presents the empirical analysis through ethnographic narratives spanning Chapters 6, 7, 8 and 9. With Yellow Vest protesters as the empirical entry, these chapters offer a detailed and immersive account of peri-urban life, shedding light on how it is experienced, contested, and transformed by those living it. Alongside these narratives, the chapters analyse and interpret the empirical data. The concluding chapter offers a synthesis of the research, contributing insights and reflections that may deepen our understanding of peri-urban life and its discontents.

Part I

Contextualising peri-urban life and its discontents

1. Discontents at the periphery

> They don't understand what our life is like
>
> – Cleo, Yellow Vest, Europe roundabout (Interview 1)

In the past decade, Europe has grappled with mounting tension stemming from a series of economic shocks and surges of social discontent in peripheries, where individuals and communities have expressed their grievances in increasingly vocal and at times confrontational ways (De Ruyter et al., 2021; Dijkstra et al., 2020; McCann, 2020; McKay et al., 2023; Rhodes-Purdy et al., 2023; Van Vulpen, 2023). This rising discontent has taken on tangible forms, notably through sometimes violent demonstrations, protest voting and the rise of populist agendas within European liberal democracies expressing a sentiment that contradicts the narrative of an improving world. Whether it is the shock of Brexit, the intensity of the Yellow Vests protests, or the disruptive blockades of farmers across Western Europe, these surges have disrupted the established order and fuelled the ascent of populism (Abdelal, 2020; Bugaric, 2018; Inglehart & Norris, 2019; Van Vulpen, 2023). The rise of these movements and the grievances they articulate raise important questions about the underlying reasons for the growing discontent in European societies and has triggered significant scholarly and political interest.

In academic circles, this multifaceted issue has been encapsulated by terms such as the "crisis of the left behind" (MacKinnon et al., 2022) and the "revenge of places that don't matter" (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018), highlighting the plight of communities adversely affected by political-economic changes and the geographical disparities that underlie these grievances. Scholars have been drawn to explore such spatialities of discontent, particularly the multi-dimensional spatial inequalities between core urban areas and peripheral regions (De Ruyter et al., 2021, 2021; Dijkstra et al., 2019; Gordon, 2018; MacKinnon et al., 2022, 2024; McCann, 2020; McKay et al., 2023; Pike et al., 2023; Rodrigues Posé et al., 2023; Sykes, 2018).

In this chapter, I introduce the French Yellow Vests as exemplifying the "crisis of the left-behind." Arising from the peri-urban peripheries, this occurrence of "revenge" reflects broader grievances and inequities experienced by communities feeling marginalised as they seek to contest current socio-economic and political systems. The Yellow Vests movement, which gained widespread attention in 2018, served as a powerful expression of discontent linked to a life lived at and in the French peri-urban peripheries (Bernard de Raymond & Bordiec, 2020; Bourdin & Torre, 2023; Bourmeau, 2019; Depraz, 2019b; Robbers, 2020). The specific dynamics of their protests offer valuable insights into the spatiality of social discontent emerging from "places that don't matter" and addresses the characteristics of such places (Bourdin & Torre, 2023; see also Sahana et al., 2023).

The objective of this chapter is therefore to contextualize the empirical case of the Yellow Vests on which this thesis rests, and to further exemplify the broader discontent emerging out of European peripheries. It advances this case as insightful to investigate and add on to research seeking to understand the complexities of the discontent emanating from these so-called "left-behind" areas, emphasizing the spatial disparities, economic challenges, the experiences, and political implications that characterize them. To this end, Section 1.1 introduces the Yellow Vests protests, explores its origins, and discusses their distinct spatial and socio-political characteristics. Highlighting how their emergence from peri-urban peripheries may underscore the spatial dynamics of "places that don't matter" in the French context, Section 1.2 engages with scholarly debates discussing such discontent and the places it emerges from.

1.1 The Yellow Vests: a discontented French periphery?

This section delves into the phenomenon of the Yellow Vests movement in France, examining its origins, evolution, and lasting impacts. Initially triggered by discontent over a diesel tax hike, the movement swiftly burgeoned into a broader protest against socio-economic disparities and perceived neglect from political authorities. The Yellow Vests movement, as researched by numerous scholars, serves as a poignant illustration of the deep-seated inequalities exacerbated by the forces of globalisation. This section explores the multifaceted nature of the movement, its geographic spread across peri-urban peripheries, and its symbolic

use of roundabouts as sites of protest. By occupying these spaces, the Yellow Vests transformed seemingly mundane locales into focal points of political expression, challenging power structures and underscoring the socio-spatial marginalisation and the lived realities experienced by many participants, ultimately shaping the French peri-urban peripheries and their discontents.

The Yellow Vests moment

"France is deeply fractured, and the Yellow Vests are just a symptom" wrote Guilluy (2018b). For the French geographer, the Yellow Vests are evidence of globalisation's inherently unequal dynamics across economic, social and political landscapes (see also Blavier, 2021; Blavier & Walker, 2020; Bourmeau, 2019; Misset & Poullaouec, 2019). What initially started as a protest against a diesel tax increase escalated into violent riots driven by the protesters' perception of socio-economic inequalities and a sense of indifference from political elites. On 17 November 2018, over 290 000 protesters wearing yellow vests began blocking road traffic on roundabouts across the country (Emanuele, 2018). In the initial weeks, they also protested on Paris's Champs Élysées avenue, closer to the seat of power. These protests highlighted the conflict between centralized decision-makers and peripheral populations enduring economic inequalities and a heavy reliance on diesel. Devised by Parisian political elites, protesters claimed the diesel tax would unfairly burden populations living in the peripheries heavily reliant on car use in their daily mobilities, making them foot the bill for the country's climate change efforts (Martin & Islar, 2021).

The Yellow Vests movement drew participants from diverse backgrounds and occupations, reflecting a broad spectrum of dissatisfaction among different segments of society. This diversity is evident from the protests' demographics, with an overrepresentation of employees and small business owners, as well as a sizeable contingent of blue collar workers and pensioners (Farbiaz, 2019). Other studies highlight the significant number of participants relying on motor vehicles for their daily transportation, underscoring their spatial spread across peripheries, as opposed to the metropolitan centres (Fourquet, 2019a). Furthermore, the majority of protesters struggled to make ends meet, living with a standard of living below the national average (see also Galland, 2018). According to Fourquet (2019a), the movement embodied what he calls a "downgraded middle class" marked by stagnant incomes and eroded purchasing power facing rising taxes and prices. These people find themselves in a middle ground, not poor enough to benefit from social welfare, yet not affluent enough to live without economic

concerns. According to Fourquet and others, the Yellow Vests represent a marginalized and overlooked middle class seeking to assert its presence and make its voice heard in the public sphere (Bourmeau, 2019; Farbiaz, 2019; Fourquet, 2019b). Despite their diverse occupations and locations, they united under a shared perception of being left behind both spatially and socio-economically by globalisation and excluded from its benefits (Guilluy, 2018b; Blavier & Walker, 2020).

As the protests continued and escalated into widespread damaging of significant landmarks, institutions, and shops, the government suspended the tax and announced minimum wages and pension rates increases to quell social unrest. Despite these measures, discontent persisted, along with the continued occupation of roundabouts nationwide. While the Yellow Vests movement *per se* may have dissipated since 2018, this study suggests that the experience it expressed, as well as its geography, has endured. It follows a substantial stream of research (e.g. Abdelal, 2020; Bourdin & Torre, 2023; Bourmeau, 2019; Darras, 2020; Della Sudda & Reungoat, 2022; Depraz, 2019; Doulin-Dimopoulos et al., 2021; Farbiaz, 2019; Fourquet, 2020; Froio & Romero-Vidal, 2023; Gallot, 2019; Misset & Poullaouec, 2019; Pelletier, 2019), and testifies that the movement's epilogue is yet to be written and remains sensitive to the current evolving context. Its revival has been notably affected by the ensuing Covid-19 pandemic, however further entrenching already existing mistrust and discontent towards political leadership (see Dreuil, 2023; Sciences Po Cevipov & Opinionway, 2023). The pandemic context is found to play an important contextual factor in my study, as it may have strengthened socio-economic and spatial inequalities and heightened peri-urban grievances and discontents (see Aubert et al., 2020; Manus, 2020).

Whatever the compromising or strengthening effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Yellow Vests have had lasting impacts. One notable outcome was the increase in voter abstention as well as in the support for the far-right *Rassemblement National* party in the 2022 presidential elections (Bourdin & Torre, 2023), a trend that appears to be continuing into the coming 2027 elections (Carriat, 2023; Lebourg & Laruelle, 2023). The movement also played a substantial role in the mass protests against the 2023 pension reform. Most importantly, in the perspective of this study, the movement has highlighted the widening gaps between an urban France characterized by those in positions of power and privilege, and a France characterized by living outside these "places that matter,"

in peri-urban peripheries that are seemingly "left behind" (Blavier & Walker, 2020; Bruneau et al., 2018; Depraz, 2019a).

A movement emerging out of peri-urban peripheries

The Yellow Vests movement revealed a range of spatial inequalities embedded within the peri-urban (Bourdin & Torre, 2023; Robbers, 2020). The protests' unprecedented spread across peri-urban peripheries, along with their opposition to diesel fuel taxes, underscored the specific mobility challenges faced by peri-urban populations, often grappling with limited access to public transportation options and extended commuting distances (Depraz, 2019a, 2019b; Robbers, 2020). Protesters perceived themselves as unfairly shouldering the costs of the country's diesel-related pollution, while decision-makers in urban centres appeared disconnected from their concerns and realities (Martin & Islar, 2021). This disparity in experiences between the central decision-making core and peripheral populations underscored deeper economic and socio-spatial inequalities present in French society.

Although from different locations and socio-economic categories, the Yellow Vests distinguished themselves geographically by occupying roundabouts across the country as a symbolic representation of their protest (Aubenas, 2018; Bernard de Raymond & Bordiec, 2020; El Haïk-Wagner, 2020; Jeanpierre, 2019; Robbers, 2020). The roundabout, a functional component of the planned peri-urban landscape, represents and contributes greatly to the development of peri-urban peripheries by structuring the ever-increasing use of cars and urban sprawl (Figure 1.1; Alonzo, 2005; Houk et al., 1996; Marchal & Stébé, 2018). Some even argue that the proliferation of roundabouts is central to the development of French peri-urban peripheries (Alonzo, 2005), defining their geography (Guilluy, 2014; Marchal & Stébé, 2018), mobilities and experiences (El Haïk-Wagner, 2020; Jeanpierre, 2019; Pelletier, 2019).

Apparatuses of the French peri-urban landscape and development, the choice of roundabouts as protest sites by the Yellow Vests was symbolic, reflecting the peri-urban realities of many participants (Robbers, 2020). These locations, central do their daily mobilities and yet at the margins of urban centres, highlighted their socio-spatial marginalisation and daily experiences. The roundabouts, thus, became more than mere venues for gathering; they symbolized the protesters' peri-urban identity, underscoring the broader socio-political significance of their movement.

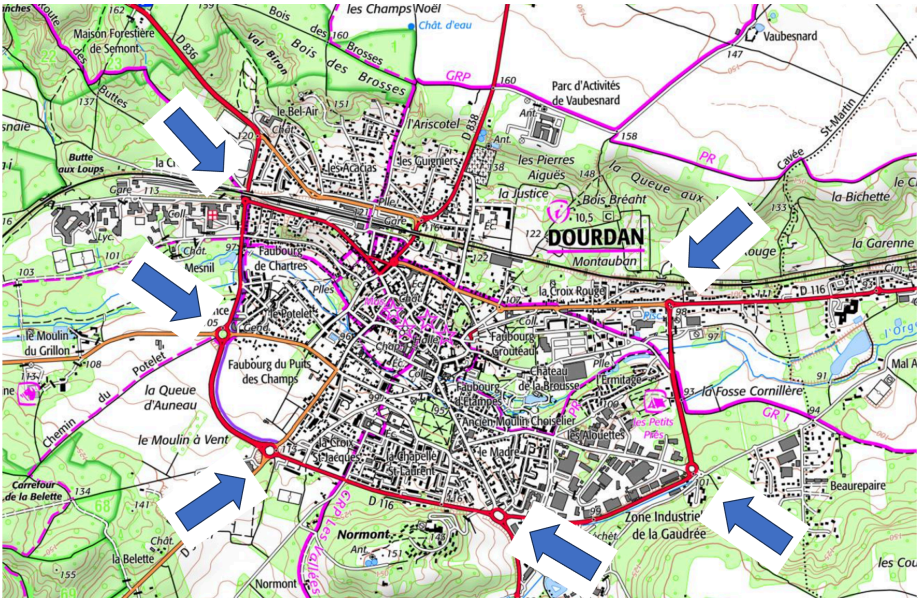


Figure 1.1
The roundabout, structuring the peri-urban peripheries of the city of Dourdan. Source: IGN, own modifications.

Shifting away the locus of political contestations from the traditional Parisian street demonstrations, the Yellow Vests' decentralisation of protests on roundabouts further signifies their spontaneous character. Following an online petition orchestrated through social media, which was signed by more than 750 000 in early November 2018 (Emanuele, 2018), roundabouts occupations sparked across the country spontaneously. This spontaneity led some to question their categorization as a social movement *per se*. Referring to the theory of resource mobilization of social movements (McCarthy & Zald, 1977), Defossez & Fassin (2019) discuss the protests as spontaneous uprisings rather than an organized and resourced movement, citing the absence of leadership, lack of participants' experience and organization resources.

However, Bernard de Raymond & Bordiec (2020) argue that the use of roundabouts served as informal and decentralised organisational structures, anchoring the movement in space (see also Robbers, 2020). The roundabout emerged as a standard site, common to all regions, where actions could be coordinated on an intra-regional scale. Moreover, as strategic traffic hubs,

roundabouts allowed the protests to be highly visible and disruptive. Figure 1.2 conveys the scale of the appropriation of roundabouts as a site of protest.

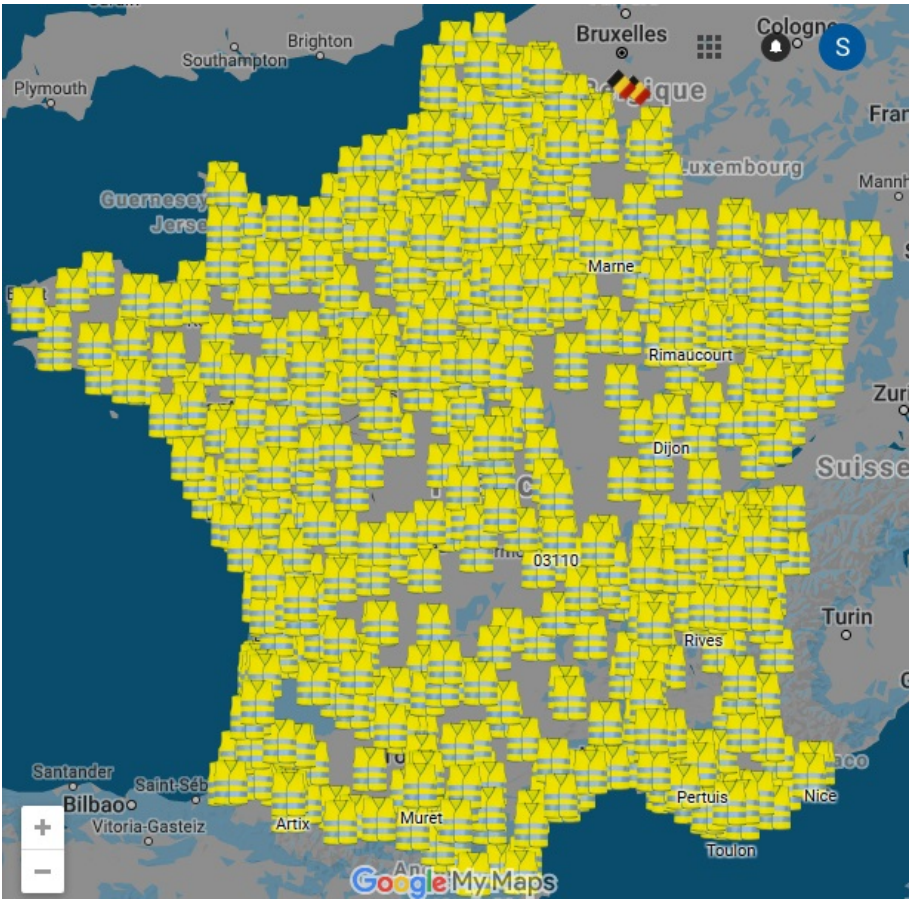


Figure 1.2
Official map of the roundabout blockade points by the Yellow Vests on 17 November 2018. Source: in (Genevois, 2018).

The Yellow Vests' occupation of roundabouts can be to this extent seen as constituting a transformative act, shifting a functional and unremarkable space into a focal point of contestation and political expression. Unlike other movements targeting symbolically charged monuments, such as the Arab Spring's "roundabout revolutions" (Weizman et al. 2015) that occupied prominent urban

squares like Cairo's Tahrir Square and Ramallah's Manara Square, the Yellow Vests chose to "occupy a void" (Robbers, 2020, p.100) in peri-urban outskirts. By blocking road traffic at these roundabouts, they effectively garnered an unprecedented level of visibility. As the architect Alonzo aptly puts it: "If you want to turn off the tap, that's where you have to be, because the roundabout is a very good point for obstructing the whole network" (Alonzo in Cassely, 2018). The Yellow Vests roundabout occupations therefore operated a shift, delocalising the space of contest from centre to periphery: seizing the roundabouts transferred the sight of the political to the peri-urban and its inhabitants' life and related discontents.

Contesting peri-urban life and its politics

During their occupations of roundabouts, the Yellow Vests constructed cabins which served as rallying points while providing both shelter and spaces for discussions and meetings (Bernard de Raymond & Bordiec, 2020; Bonin & Liochon, 2022). These structures became emblematic of the movement and its identity (Robbers, 2020). Often made of wooden pallets and disposable materials, they constituted focal sites for protesters, where speeches, demonstrations, and banners amplified their messages and demands, and ultimately fostered a sense of community among themselves (Figure 1.3; Doulin-Dimopoulos et al., 2021). The cabins turned into physical representations of their struggle and served as a powerful statement symbolizing their resistance against an overall socio-spatial condition determined by economic and mobility constraints (Bernard de Raymond & Bordiec, 2020; Blavier, 2021).

The construction of cabins as a form of protest is a recurring theme in various movements, where they serve as a physical representation of resistance and a space for fostering politics and relationships. The contestation of the "ZAD" (*Zone à défendre* - Zone to Defend) in Nantes in the early 2010's provides a compelling example (Goeury, 2016; Heinonen, 2019, 2019; Macé, 2019; Pailloux, 2015). The ZAD, an agricultural terrain near Nantes, became a symbol of resistance against a new airport construction. Protesters, including local farmers and activists, built structures, including cabins, to resist eviction. They became symbols of the movement, drawing national attention to their cause. The act of building and using these cabins was a powerful statement against the proposed airport construction. This resistance culminated in the establishment of a self-organized autonomous zone, known as the ZAD.

Figure 1.3
A Yellow Vests' Cabin on an Aurillac Roundabout, 15 Dec 2018, with banners reading "Refractory Gaulish Village" / "Unity makes strength, join us!". Source: JulesK, Licence retrived from Shutterstock, Photo ID 1266966481

The construction of cabins on roundabouts by the Yellow Vests carried profound spatial-political implications, challenging conventional notions of public space, especially within peri-urban regions. These cabins effectively transformed roundabouts – spaces of transit and functionality – into politically charged arenas (Bernard de Raymond & Bordiec, 2020; Doulin-Dimopoulos et al., 2021). In doing so, roundabout occupants reclaimed a status that had been previously denied to these spaces within the context of modern urban planning, akin to that of a public square (Ravelli, 2020; Robbers, 2020; Vernier, 2020).

As I will portray in Chapter 9, the occupants of these cabins subvert the intended function of roundabouts, imbuing them with a new significance as ephemeral and dynamic "agoras" of political discourse. Throughout the protests, these once-sterile traffic junctions evolve from impersonal infrastructures made for transit – a "non-place" as defined by Augé (1995) – into vibrant spaces where politics and

community intersect. These cabins became focal points, not only for expressing grievances but also for fostering social cohesion among peri-urban inhabitants. This transformation effectively relocates the locus of conflict to the peri-urban peripheries, highlighting the inherent decentralizing nature of these landscapes. Originally conceived to divert tensions away from urban centres, these occupied roundabouts paradoxically centralize and spotlight the struggles and realities of peri-urban life. In essence, they become symbolic nodes, akin to traditional urban squares, embodying the socio-geographical complexities and contestations of these marginalized areas.

By mobilizing throughout peri-urban peripheries, the Yellow Vests movement was able to engage a broader range of individuals who shared common concerns in challenging existing power structures and demanding their voices to be heard. This spatial strategy proved effective in gaining visibility and attracting support, as it resonated with the lived experiences of a significant segment of the population. By occupying and adopting the roundabout as the symbol of their protests, the Yellow Vests effectively initiated a shift in the understanding of space used for political action, while simultaneously recognizing that the very same space encapsulates the experiences of those who inhabit it.

1.2 Understanding peripheries and their "revenge"

In this section, I transition from discussing the spatial-political implications of the Yellow Vests movement to delving into broader scholarly debates concerning the underlying causes of societal discontent and its geographical manifestations. The Yellow Vests movement serves as a poignant example, embodying a "backlash" that both reflects and brings to light the socio-spatial realities and related experiences within French peripheral areas. Such account sheds light on the significance of identifying and understanding these "places that don't matter" and the grievances they may evoke. By situating the Yellow Vests within the broader discourse on left-behind places and their discontent, I aim to explore the intricate interplay of socio-economic dynamics and spatial inequalities, providing further insights into the nuanced nature of discontent in European peripheries.

Experiencing places that don't matter…

Scholars across various disciplines have focused their attention on this context of backlashes against globalisation, particularly regarding experiences of inequality that have not only persisted but intensified. Piketty (2013, 2015) argues, for example, that the economic convergence promised by a globalised economy has actually led to socio-economic divergence. This trend has not spared developed countries such as France, in which inequality has increased since the 1980's (Bozio et al., 2019; Piketty, 2013, 2015). At the regional level, Rodríguez-Pose (2018) identifies a key factor underlying the "revenge of the places that don't matter" to be a sense of deprivation experienced by residents in areas that perceive themselves as being excluded from the benefits enjoyed by thriving "superstar cities." MacKinnon et al. (2022, 2024), and more generally emerging geographies of the "left-behind" and discontent (Bourdin & Torre, 2023; Huijsmans, 2023; McCann, 2020; Pike et al., 2023), support this notion by highlighting the exclusion and marginalisation faced by inhabitants of certain regions. Definite characteristics of these places remain elusive, but they are typically understood in contrast with major cities and regions driving economic growth and development (Rodríguez-Pose 2018). Places that don't matter are those that deviate from this path, and which are associated to:

> Crises in the agricultural and/or industrial sectors, to significant outward migration and brain drain and more importantly to a feeling that there is no future and no hope (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018, p.196).

Scholars have also attempted to characterize these places under the umbrella term "left-behind," acknowledging their economic stagnation or decline, as well as broader social, demographic, political, and cultural concerns (Mackinnon et al., 2022, 2024; Pike et al., 2023). While acknowledging the multifaceted nature of "left-behind places," MacKinnon and colleagues (2022) further observe that issues of identity and place attachment are also integral to their current condition. Such subjective dimensions have been recently supplemented by the argued importance of comprehending the factors contributing to feelings of exclusion and marginalisation. Indeed, some studies converge on the significance of understanding the emotional and experiential dimensions of exclusion as fundamental to comprehending the lived realities of left-behind peripheries as well as the roots of their populations' discontents (see Hannemann et al., 2023; Mulligan & Brunson, 2020). These studies highlight the nascent research interest

in these geographies that not only addresses economic disparities but also engage with the lived experiences and emotional realities of individuals in these regions, suggesting a more holistic approach to tackling the multifaceted challenges faced by "left-behind" communities.

The recognition of the experiential dimension of these spaces is only just beginning to be fully acknowledged as a valid perspective and argument for understanding the realities of peripheries and their role in generating discontent (Huijsmans, 2023). The focus on these areas as places where inhabitants live, manage challenges, and navigate the complexities of everyday life requires further exploration and understanding. While these accounts acknowledge the existence of these places and their distinct challenges (MacKinnon et al., 2024; Pike et al., 2023), they may not furnish a deep consideration of the lived experiences and the impact of these challenges on the individuals and communities within these regions. In other words, the scale of the experience of these places, even though mentioned, stands somehow relegated to the back. The recent acknowledgment of this gap in the literature underscores the necessity of exploring these places beyond their physical, economic, socio-spatial, even cultural structures and within the context of the lived experiences of the people inhabiting them. Within the left-behind, there may be then a "left-behindness" (Hannemann et al., 2023) that may call for further clarification of these places in a deeper human geographical sense. This comprehension should venture beyond factors structuring peripheries to encompass an understanding of their inhabitants' experiences, aspirations, and the broader socio-cultural context in which they are embedded.

I situate my approach to the Yellow Vests grievances within this nascent scholarly complementary lens emphasizing the experiential dimensions of social discontent emanating from these "places that don't matter." This perspective acknowledges that beyond economic disparities and spatial factors, the discontents expressed by Yellow Vests are deeply tied to experiences and feelings of exclusion and marginalisation. By focusing on these experiential components, my research then supplements these analyses and aligns with their perspective towards a more holistic understanding of discontent, incorporating not just structural but also emotional and experiential realities of individuals within these communities. Such approach will emphasise the complex interplay between economic conditions, spatial dynamics, and the lived experiences of those experiencing and contesting the French peripheries, offering insights into the roots of their grievances and the broader phenomenon of social discontent in European peripheries.

… and their "revenge"

Understanding the nuanced experiences inherent to these peripheral regions is critical for further approaching the origins and implications of their "backlash" and political ramifications. Delving deeper into the lived realities of individuals within these marginalized areas provides valuable insights into the socio-economic, cultural, and spatial dynamics that underpin their discontent and resistance to established power structures. By exploring the multifaceted dimensions of discontent within "left-behind" places, we can unravel the complexities of their grievances and the motivations driving anti-establishment movements such as the Yellow Vests. In this context, the examination of "revenge" as a response to perceived neglect and marginalisation provides a lens through which to analyse the transformative potential of movements and the rise of populist agendas in reshaping the political landscape.

The notion of "backlash" or "revenge" is indeed significant in understanding these discontents and anti-establishment surges, especially as they are often used in conjunction with populism to describe reactions and resistance from "left behind" places (Andrews, 2017; Bourdin & Torre, 2023; Broz et al., 2019; Goodhart, 2017; Gordon, 2018; Huijsmans, 2023; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). Such backlash has been argued to encompass grievances and frustrations expressed by segments of society who feel marginalized or left behind, leading them to rally against the established order and support anti-establishment and far-right discourses. It reflects overall a sense of discontent, fuelled by economic disparities, social divisions, and political disillusionment, and seeks to challenge the prevailing narrative of the elites and restore a sense of control and recognition to the "voiceless" majority (Abdelal, 2020; Broz et al., 2019; Bugaric, 2018; Inglehart & Norris, 2019; Rhodes-Purdy et al., 2023).

However, the notion of populism itself is subject to debate and requires further clarification (see also Bourdin & Torre, 2023). Mudde's (2004, 2013) definition of populism as "thin ideology," primarily focused on assigning blame to perceived corrupt elites, helps in recognizing movements like the Yellow Vests as a means of challenging their perceived peripheralization by those in power. Confronting what they see as the dominance of metropolitan centres, a crisis of the welfare state, and rising identity-related tensions, protesters engaged in resistance to preserve their diminishing social and symbolic capital (Masclet, 2019; Misset & Poullaouec, 2019). For example, the growing support for France's far-right *Rassemblement National* (RN) party stems from this desire to address the loss of visibility and a

symbolic downgraded experience by a significant portion of the population (Bourdin & Torre, 2023; Masclet, 2019).

In this context, the Yellow Vests' actions can be interpreted as different from "thick ideology" (Mudde, 2004, 2013) – which denotes a comprehensive worldview encompassing specific, detailed political, economic, and social principles – but rather as a quest for recognition and respect from the ruling powers (Abdelal, 2020). This distinction is significant, as "thick ideology" often implies a rigid, all-encompassing set of beliefs that guide a political movement's objectives and methods. The Yellow Vests, to this extent, have been primarily motivated by a desire for societal recognition and a response to their grievances, rather than pure political ideology. This movement's focus on broad, fundamental issues of socio-spatial justice and visibility diverges from the more doctrinaire approaches associated with traditional political ideologies, underscoring a nuanced form of protest rooted in the experienced injustices faced by its participants. Essentially, far-right and populist parties have successfully harnessed the grievances of those inhabiting peripheries, offering them a platform to reclaim control, being recognised and have their voices heard, as also witnessed during the Dutch farmers' protests (Van Vulpen, 2023), or the UK Vote Leave Campaign (Abreu & Öner, 2020).

Such perspective aligns with Marcuse's (2010) argument in his study of the American Tea Party movement, where he delves into the underlying factors fuelling the movement's popular support by emphasizing the importance of understanding the role of everyday life experiences in shaping political attitudes and behaviours. Marcuse (2010) argues that the Tea Party's appeal cannot be solely attributed to ideological differences or political rhetoric but is deeply rooted in the lived realities of its supporters. He suggests that individuals drawn to the Tea Party are often grappling with economic insecurity, social marginalisation, and a sense of disenfranchisement in their everyday lives. One key aspect of Marcuse's (2010) argument is the notion that political discontent is not just driven by abstract policy debates or partisan allegiances but is profoundly influenced by individuals' personal experiences and perceptions of the world around them. He writes:

> The everyday worry and deep discontent that the present crisis has brought to the fore finds its outlet in this form of right-wing activism, by those already suffering from or perceiving an imminent danger of being subjected to unemployment, loss

> of health care, foreclosure of home or eviction from rental, and loss of even those gains their parents made before them in everyday life (Marcuse, 2010, p.365).

This quote underscores the significance of understanding how everyday struggles, such as economic precarity and social instability, contribute to the rise of right-wing activism. It highlights the connection between personal hardships and political mobilization, emphasizing that individuals experiencing these challenges are often drawn to movements that promise to address their grievances and restore a sense of control over their lives. This sentiment is echoed in the grievances articulated by the Yellow Vests movement in France. Therefore, by examining the experiences of individuals within "left-behind" communities, we gain insight into the underlying drivers of populist reactions, which are not merely ideologically grounded but also rooted in real-life experiences of inequalities and insecurities.

The populist "backlash" against the liberal establishment may to this extent be argued to not be solely rooted in ideological differences. It is, to a large degree, a reflection of the experiences and aspirations of a socio-spatially overlooked share of the population seeking recognition and a voice. This emergence of "other politics" signifies a shift in the political landscape (Broz et al., 2019; Bugaric, 2018; Guiso et al., 2017). These reactions possess a remarkable influence and "soft" power, spotlighting the growing significance of peripheral regions in the public and political consciousness. The conventional divides that once separated left from right, workers from employers, and rural from urban areas are to this extent undergoing transformation (Piketty & Cagé, 2023). New fault lines are emerging, characterized by stark differences in experiences related to proximity and distance, and the intricate interplay between metropolitan and peripheral areas. However, as Guilluy (2018a) argues, "although geography reveals, it doesn't condition" (2018a, p.49). One doesn't ultimately vote for Brexit or *Rassemblement National* because one lives in a small town or in the countryside. Inversely, one doesn't vote for Macron or Biden because one lives in Paris or New York (Guilluy, 2018a). Nonetheless, the political landscape emerging from French peripheries sheds light on a certain spatiality to the backlash by those challenging the economic, social, and symbolic dominance of metropolitan centres (Piketty & Cagé, 2023).

Contrasting with other significant political "backlash" occurrences, such as the Brexit referendum or the electoral successes of far-right coalitions in countries like the Netherlands and Sweden, the Yellow Vests protests in 2018 distinctively manifested its dissent outside the conventional electoral system. Unlike these

other events, which were characterized by clear voting processes and often by the ascension of specific political parties with well-defined agendas, the Yellow Vests did not channel their grievances through elections nor did they rally behind a unified platform or leadership typical of organized populist platforms. This distinction highlights the movement's grassroots nature and its focus on immediate, tangible issues rather than aligning with the structured, ideological goals that define traditional political campaigns. Nevertheless, the Yellow Vests' backlash can be defined as a form of "voiced discontent" that possessed considerable political force (Bourdin & Torre, 2023).

* * *

The "revenge of places that don't matter" reveals polarized experiences of globalisation, discriminating visible "winners" from invisible "losers" (see also Rodrik, 2018). This phenomenon emphasizes the pressing need to understand and address the experiences and grievances of these marginalized communities. The growing body of research dedicated to investigating the challenges faced by the "left behind" provides a platform for discussing the social, economic, and political dynamics that contribute to their discontent. The case of the Yellow Vests movement in France serves as a remarkable illustration, shedding light on the factors behind the experiences of "left-behindness" among inhabitants in specific regions – and peri-urban areas. By examining the grievances and demands expressed by the French Yellow Vests, we can gain insights into the spatial, socio-economic, political, and cultural factors that contribute to the sense of marginalisation and discontent within these communities and places.

Although many Yellow Vests protesters might not formally stand as being left-behind according to general development indicators, their experience of being so is yet to be understood. Occupying roundabouts and building cabins, they personified a peri-urban class that had come to be and also to feel both displaced and disregarded, striving to impose themselves back onto the stage, wearing a high visibility yellow jacket (Martin & Islar, 2021; Bourmeau, 2019; Fourquet, 2019a). As I will demonstrate in this thesis, this case underscores the importance for geographers to move beyond looking at mainly economic and regional inequalities and consider the subjective experiences of the left-behind in these areas. Focusing on the French peri-urban and exploring its multidimensionality and experiences can contribute to a broader understanding of left-behind places, enrich the existing research, and offer complementary insights that can inform academic and policy debates in and beyond France.

In the next chapter, I will narrow the focus to the context of the French peri-urban space, where the Yellow Vests movement found fertile ground for its grievances to take root and flourish. By zooming in on this specific setting, I discuss the distinct socio-economic, cultural, and spatial dynamics that contributed to the emergence and evolution of the Yellow Vests phenomenon, and the experiences that shape it as a dimension of the left-behind.

2. The peri-urban matter

> The emergence of resistance from below has caused all the social perceptions imposed from above over the past four decades to fall apart. Everywhere the dynamics of popular discontent arise not only from a certain sociology but also from a certain geography.
>
> – Guilluy (2016/2019, p.iii-iv)
>
> *Ni ville ni campagne, mi-ville mi-campagne*
> Neither city nor country, half city half country
>
> – Vanier (2003, Abstract)

France is often depicted as a captivating realm of enchantment and allure, with its iconic Parisian boulevards and idyllic countryside. Our imaginations wander through the romantic streets of Paris, savouring wine and cheese on a terrace while overlooking a bustling town square, or losing ourselves in the charm of lavender fields and coastal retreats. Yet, behind this picturesque facade lie other narratives. One of these concerns the peri-urban, an ambiguous spatiality that is often unseen and unacknowledged. In fact, almost half of the French population dwells in what could be termed peri-urban areas (Lévy et al., 2023). Life in these areas may lack the romanticism we associate with the stereotypical French experience. Instead, the peri-urban involves to a large extent a practical and functional space, shaping the everyday experiences of its inhabitants in distinctive and sometimes challenging ways.

The Yellow Vests occupation of roundabouts has been widely recognized as a manifestation of the frustrations experienced by individuals living in peri-urban areas. Located on the outskirts of major cities, the peri-urban represents a hybrid space inhabited by diverse individuals who lead distinctive lives shaped by their proximity to urban centres, albeit without fully reaping the benefits offered by these dynamic hubs. Peri-urban areas defy traditional categorizations, blurring the

boundaries between urban and rural environments. It is a space where urban influences intertwine with characteristics of surrounding rural landscapes, resulting in a diverse range of experiences and challenges.

This chapter delves into the characteristics of the peri-urban space, discussing the various definitions invoked to understand its complexity as well as the grievances it may invoke. It addresses this space as a multidimensional periphery, which transcends simple geographical categorisations and carries significant implications for both economic, socio-cultural status, social relationships and lived experiences. Expanding upon existing research, the aim here is to situate and lay the foundations for my approach to the French peri-urban and the factors that may shape the lives and the grievances expressed by Yellow Vests. In other words, the chapter seeks to discuss and situate within existing research my understanding of the multifaceted nature of the French peri-urban, and how an experiential outlook on this spatiality could enrich our understanding of the "left behind," which I outlined in Chapter 1.

2.1 A complex space

The Yellow Vests protests exposed a significant socio-economic and spatial divide within the country. As discussed in Chapter 1, the movement emerged as a response to the perceived disparities faced by middle to low-income groups residing in peri-urban peripheries. French geographers (Depraz, 2019b, 2019a; Guilluy, 2018b; Fourquet, 2020), as well as international scholars (Robbers, 2020; Goodhart in Zappi, 2018), have highlighted the connection between the Yellow Vests protests and what I discuss in this thesis as the peri-urban. This raises questions about the interplay between the roots of their discontent and the socio-spatial complexities of the peri-urban space where they emerged.

Situated on the fringes of urban centres, the peri-urban is a hybrid zone that encompasses both urban and rural characteristics (Ravetz et al., 2013). It is a space where inhabitants, themselves sociologically diverse, experience the proximity to urban dynamics, such as employment and services, while remaining distant enough to face limitations and exclusion from the full urban benefits. This socio-spatiality and set of challenges have drawn the attention of scholars, prompting investigations into various aspects of the peri-urban space (e.g. Cusin et al., 2016; Follmann, 2022; Piorr et al., 2011; Ravetz et al., 2013; Sahana et al., 2023). Despite these efforts, however, a consensus on its definition has yet to be reached.

As Ravetz et al. (2013) argue the peri-urban "resists simple definitions" as a "space in between, not clearly delineated, a hybrid result of different forces at different scales" (2013, p.13 & 41). The elusive nature of the peri-urban fuels ongoing academic debates regarding its definition, its context, its dynamics, and the experiences it engenders. This underscores the scholarly significance of this study, as it seeks to expand the discourse surrounding how such space may be experienced amid urbanisation dynamics and the socio-spatial and economic inequalities it may engender, specifically within the French context, while also offering potential insights applicable to other European contexts.

Where is the peri-urban?

Reflecting the broader literature, Ravetz et al. (2013) pose the peri-urban as the dominant urban form and spatial planning challenge of the twenty-first century. As cities develop and expand, the peri-urban zone – or "interface" (see Adell, 1999; Simon, 2005) – emerges as a critical frontier where urbanisation interfaces with rural landscapes, presenting a complex and evolving space that requires careful consideration to address related needs and challenges. It is not just a peripheral or transitional space; rather, it is a "new kind of multi-functional territory" (Ravetz et al., 2013, p.13) that involves a dynamic and transformative urban form, which is at the heart of contemporary urbanisation.

It is important to note that the term "peri-urban" encompasses diverse interpretations and connotations across different geographical contexts and scholarly discussions. Generally, it denotes areas situated at the interface of urban and rural environments, characterized by a blend of land uses that include residential, agricultural, commercial, and industrial activities. These zones often find themselves in a state of flux, influenced by the forces of urban expansion and rural preservation, leading to a variety of social, economic, and environmental challenges (Cusin et al., 2016; Piorr et al., 2011; Ravetz et al., 2013; Simon David, 2005). In the context of the Global South, the peri-urban is typically associated with rapid, sometimes unplanned, urban sprawl into rural territories (Follmann, 2022; Sahana et al., 2023). This fosters distinct socio-spatial dynamics, including the emergence of informal settlements, the development of new forms of livelihoods, and intricate governance issues that stem from the merging of urban and rural traits. In the Global North, research conducted on peri-urban areas in older or post-industrial countries, such as the densely urbanized European continent, is subject to a more fluid definition and remains to be a topic of substantial scholarly debate (Nilsson et al., 2013; Piorr et al., 2011; Ravetz et al.,

2013). This is primarily due to the persistence of peri-urbanisation, characterized by urban sprawl featuring low-density, sporadic, and dispersed urban development. This phenomenon engenders a complex web of processes and transformations that researchers find both vivid and relevant for addressing socio-economic and spatial inequalities (e.g. Couch et al., 2008; Cusin et al., 2016; Nilsson et al., 2013; Piorr et al., 2011; Ravetz et al., 2013).

In this context, peri-urban spaces in France have garnered substantial attention from a prominent body of researchers in the fields of geography and sociology (e.g. Benoit, 2019a; Charmes, 2020; Cusin et al., 2016; Desjardins, 2017; Marchal & Stébé, 2018). Beyond its definition as a statistical category, the French concept of *périurbain* often involves broader political and social implications (Girard, 2012, 2013, 2019). It often identifies areas on the fringes of cities that have experienced substantial residential growth, particularly in the form of detached single-family homes, often without a proportional increase in infrastructure or services (Charmes, 2009; Davidovitch, 1968). This conceptualization hints at socio-spatial segregation, highlighting communities that may not have the amenities and opportunities present in more central urban locales (Cusin et al., 2016; Depraz, 2017). It also alludes to political dimensions, suggesting a space that once offered opportunities but has evolved into one marked by constraints (Charmes, 2017). These dimensions are further developed in the next subsection and in Section 2.2. Concurrently, peri-urban areas may also share similarities with rural areas, echoing rural geography's insights into the interplay of urbanisation and rural settings. Woods' (2011, 2019, 2020, 2023) work on the rural emphasizes such complexity of rural areas and ongoing transitions, which can be paralleled with peri-urban spaces where urbanisation meets and merges with the countryside. This creates a distinct blend of challenges and opportunities, sharing some similarities with the peri-urban.

Along these lines, this thesis acknowledges the peri-urban as a space where urbanisation intersects with rural landscapes, presenting a complex terrain that demands attention to multi-layered dimensions. By exploring the multifaceted nature of peri-urban areas, the thesis aims to shed light on the nuanced experiences of communities residing in these transitional spaces, offering insights into the factors shaping their socio-spatial dynamics and contributing to emerging social discontent. Through this exploration, the thesis seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the peri-urban condition and its significance in contemporary urban and rural discourse. By doing so, it encompasses these various definitions, from the French socio-political concept of *périurbain* to acknowledging its rural

essence. In recognizing the interplay between urbanisation and rural elements within peri-urban areas, the thesis settles on a nuanced perspective that will enable a capture of the distinct socio-economic and experiential dynamics invoked by these transitional landscapes.

Locating the French peri-urban

Before diving into the complexity of the French peri-urban as a space defined by multidimensional inequality, it is significant to firstly address it as a spatial categorisation in its own right, subject to ongoing debate and definition. Generally, peri-urban areas are understood as distinct from and spread around urban agglomerations (Figure 2.1; Piorr et al., 2011). Although its etymology refers to areas surrounding cities, such as suburbs, the peri-urban differs from the suburban in that it is not characterized by continuous built-up space, lack of open spaces, and a direct connection with the agglomeration. Rather, the peri-urban involves a mosaic of built and unbuilt spaces. Some forms dominate its landscape: zones of activities, a form of individual housing called *lotissements pavillonaires*[1], gated communities, old village cores, etc (Charmes, 2019; Cusin et al., 2016; Marchal & Stébé, 2017, 2018). The expansion of the peri-urban is essentially a result of urban sprawl initiated in the 1950's, as cities expanded outward, and people from rural areas moved to peri-urban regions, along with the mass adoption of motorised mobilities (Alonzo, 2005). While rural-to-urban migration declined in many countries after 1975, peri-urbanisation has continued to persist (Charmes, 2009; 2020).

For decades, Depraz (2019a) argues, the peri-urban was promoted as an "opportune urbanism," praised as an alternative to the denser and deemed less safe *banlieues* (suburbs), offering access to cheaper and safer individual property.

[1] The term *lotissements pavillonnaires* in France refers to suburban and peri-urban housing developments typically characterized by individually owned, detached or semi-detached houses, often built in a similar architectural style. These developments are usually planned and built by a single developer and are known for providing a homogeneous residential environment. They emerged as a popular form of housing in the post-World War II era, catering to the growing middle class's desire for homeownership and more space outside the dense urban centers. The *lotissements pavillonnaires* reflect the French aspiration for a comfortable family life in a semi-urban setting, offering a blend of urban convenience and the tranquility of suburban life. However, these areas also face challenges such as dependency on cars due to less accessible public transportation, leading to debates around urban sprawl, environmental sustainability, and social segregation (Broussard, 2020; Davidovitch, 1968; Marchal, 2017b; Marchal & Stébé, 2017).

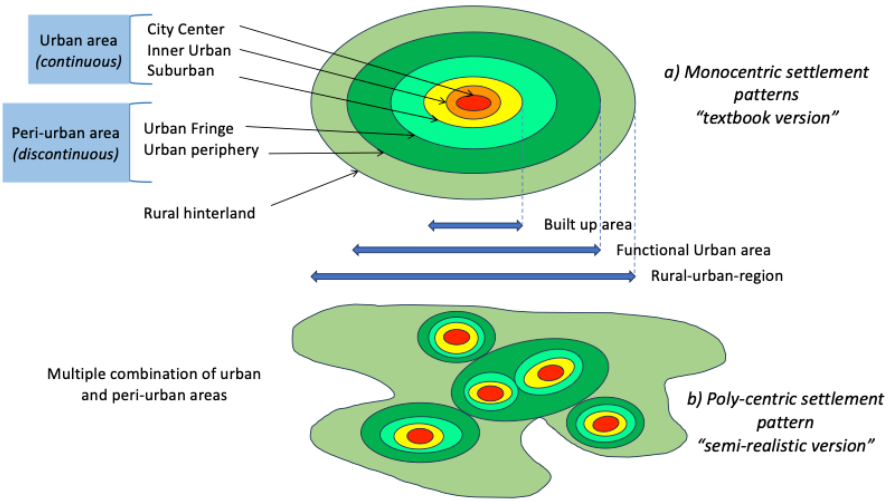


Figure 2.1

Peri-urban areas rural-urban-regions as conceptualised and modelized by Piorr et al. (2011). Source: adapted from Piorr et al. (2011, p. 25).

This process surfaced all over France (De Jarcy & Remy, 2010; Houk et al., 1996), as well as in other European countries (Piorr et al., 2011): roads were built, commercial and industrial zones sprung up, and housing schemes followed. This happened to such an extent that French peri-urban sprawl has been argued to be one of the most intensive compared to other Western European countries (De Jarcy & Remy, 2010). However, the development of peri-urbanisation generated criticism for aggravating social segregation by creating an *entre-soi* (exclusionary effect), and it has been further correlated with electoral support to the far-right. This argument has been well documented and is still the subject of academic controversies (Charmes et al., 2013; Charmes, 2020; Chevalier, 2017; Girard, 2012, 2019; Guilluy, 2018a).

Such extensive peri-urbanisation process in France has led the National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE) to officialise the "peri-urban" as statistical category in 1996. However, there remains an ongoing debate surrounding its very delimitation (Aragau, 2018; Marchal & Stébé, 2018; Potier, 2007). While delimiting the peri-urban periphery remains challenging, one can refer to the official 2010 map of the urban areas provided by the governmental Commission for Territorial Equality (Figure 2.2).

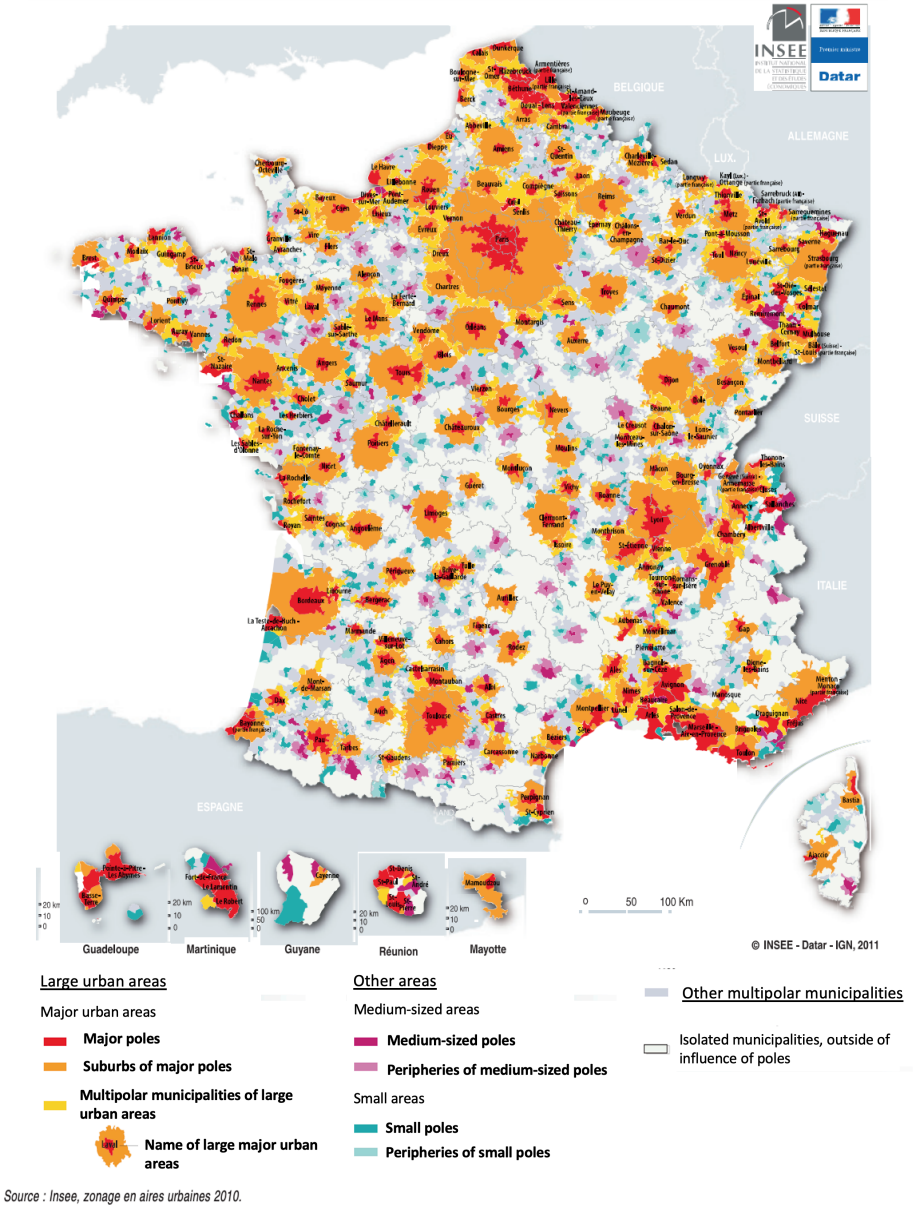
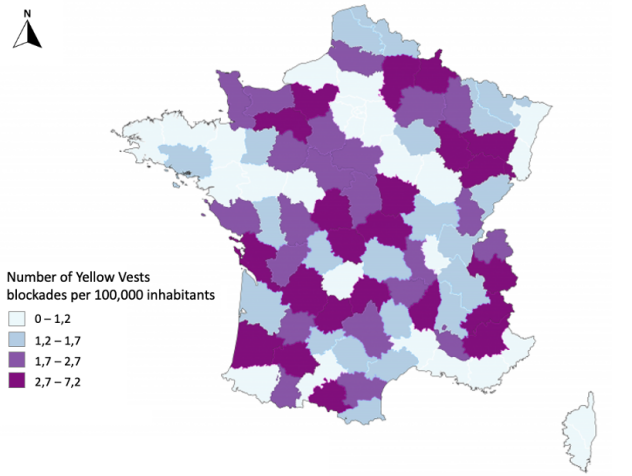


Figure 2.2

Map of the urban areas zoning, 2010. Source: INSEE in (Brutel & Lévy, 2011, p.2), caption translated by author

In Figure 2.2, the peri-urban refers to areas located outside of cities but still influenced by them. These areas typically develop around and between major urban poles and their suburbs forming rings or corridors (see also Figure 2.1). This visualization demonstrates the diverse and diffuse nature of spaces that constitute the peri-urban. In such official renderings, peri-urban peripheries are distinguished by lower income levels (Figure 2.4) and lower population density (Figure 2.5) in comparison to the metropoles. These distributions intriguingly align with the map of the Yellow Vests' protests (Figure 2.3), which reflects a similar pattern with the distribution of peri-urban areas in Figure 2.2 (see also Genevois, 2018; Girault, 2018). In addressing these attempts to delineating the peri-urban space, it is crucial to recognize that these definitions largely present absolute geographies. This means they typically outline the peri-urban areas based on specific criteria such as distance from urban centres or population density thresholds, without considering the dynamic and fluid nature of peri-urban environments. These absolute representations may overlook the complex interplay of urban and rural characteristics, as well as the diverse socio-economic and experiential dynamics that may define peri-urban spaces (Depraz, 2017). Therefore, while these definitions provide a starting point for understanding peri-urban areas, they may not fully capture the intricacies and nuances of these spaces.

Along these lines, the peri-urban defies simplistic categorizations and mapping, and it is far from being a monolithic entity. The Yellow Vests movement vividly illustrated that it is not a fixed geographical region, but a dynamic relational space deeply intertwined with the lived experiences of its inhabitants. Their discontent is not solely rooted in predefined boundaries or statistical data but is inherently connected to the intricate web of socio-spatial relationships that shape their daily lives and experiences. This complexity calls for a relational and experiential approach that considers the evolving interactions between urban and rural influences, economic disparities, social dynamics, and the experiences of peri-urban residents. By adopting such approach, this thesis further aims to explore the multifaceted experiences of those living on the peri-urban peripheries, providing an opportunity to capture their grievances and additional factors that drive and shape them (Section 3.1).



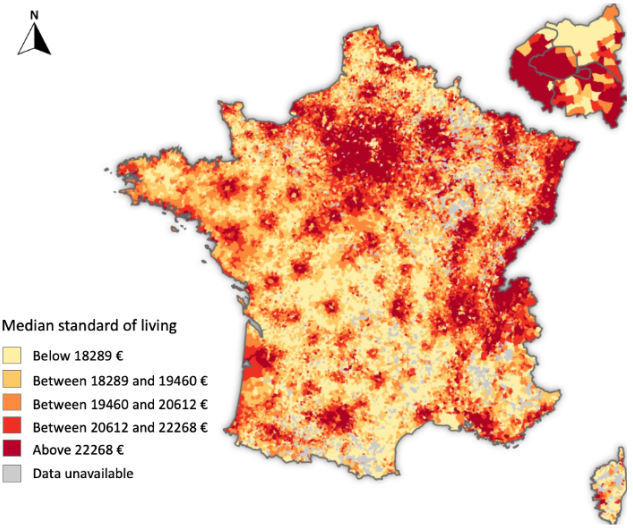


Figure 2.3 (above)
Map of Yellow Vests mobilization by department in November 2018. Source: translated and adapted from Algan et al. (2018).

Figure 2.4 (below)
Median standard of living in France in 2015. Source: translated and adapted from INSEE, 2015 in Certes, (2017)

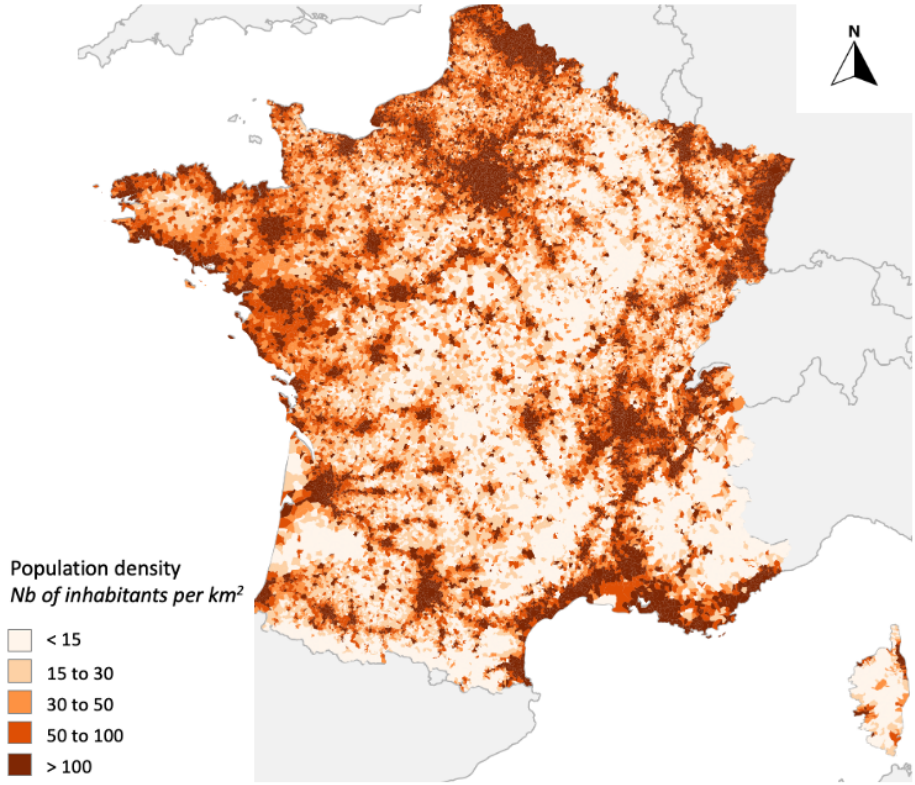


Figure 2.5

Population density (number of inhabitants per km^2), France, 2019. Source: translated and adapted from IGN in Populationdata, (2019).

In a similar vein, it is important to note that defining the peri-urban beyond absolute terms is not confined to the French context. Scholars working on various regions have grappled with defining and understanding such space, employing different approaches, methods, and indicators to dissect its complexity (e.g. Ahani & Dadashpoor, 2021; Nilsson et al., 2013; Piorr et al., 2011; Sahana et al., 2023). By examining the peri-urban through this study's French lens, we can glean insights that inform both academic and policy discussions within a broader, particularly Western European setting, and further understand the socio-spatial dynamics and experiences that underpin the struggles of those residing on the edges of its urbanized world.

Conceptualising the French peri-urban periphery

To approach the peri-urban, the experiences and inequalities of this spatiality, a first clue may be found in Guilluy's (2014) notion of the *France périphérique* (peripheral France), which he argues the Yellow Vests embodied through their protests (see Guilluy, 2018b). Guilluy's notion represents a merging of social and spatial dimensions to understand the marginalized and socio-economically disadvantaged areas at the periphery of major urban centres (see also Goodhart in Zappi, 2018). Since its introduction, this notion has significantly influenced political discussions and stimulated academic debates regarding the conceptualization and examination of French peripheries, particularly peri-urban areas (see Charmes, 2009; Cusin et al., 2016; Guilluy, 2018a). To a significant degree, the *France périphérique* has constituted a platform for understanding the socio-spatial dynamics and disparities prevalent in French society as it overcomes conventional analytical binaries between urban and rural aeras. Within what he labels a 'new' social geography of French peripheries, Guilluy (2014) formulates the *France périphérique* as follows:

> From rural areas to small towns and medium-sized cities (…), what these areas have in common is that they are far from the most active employment areas, the sites that matter in globalisation. (…) It is in fact these areas of the *France périphérique* that accumulate social and economic fragility and where most of the new working classes are now distributed, due to economic and land logics. Categories that were previously opposed (…) now form a socio-cultural continuum and share, not a class consciousness, but a common perception of the negative effects of globalisation (Guilluy, 2014, p.9-10; own trsl).

While there are ongoing debates regarding its conceptual boundaries, it is widely agreed that the *France périphérique* is deeply characterized by its peri-urban landscape. Geographer Depraz (2017) underlines the fluid and dynamic nature of both, encompassing declining small towns and urban enclaves within large rural areas. Essentially, the *France périphérique* predominantly takes on a peri-urban form, encompassing a diverse range of areas that blur the lines between urban and rural, thereby highlighting the distinctive characteristics and complexities of such hybrid space. In essence, one could therefore argue the peri-urban firstly defines a periphery: a space at the fringe of centre(s), as its etymology indicates (cf. Kühn, 2015; see also Pike et al., 2023). In France, it specifically involves a diffuse and hybrid space which straddles both urban and rural areas, mostly characterized by

its dependence to metropolitan dynamics, yet too far to fully benefit from it. The peri-urban is not urban, nor exclusively rural: it is a diffuse periphery (Depraz, 2017, 2019b).

The concept of the *France périphérique* has been the subject of some critiques, with one primary objection being its creation of a binary opposition that replaces the traditional urban/rural divide with a new binary between metropolitan areas and the peripheries (e.g. Depraz, 2017; Desjardins, 2017; Girard, 2019; Gintrac & Mekdjian, 2014). Some scholars argue that this oversimplification fails to acknowledge the complexities and diversities within peripheral regions, thereby obscuring nuanced socio-spatial dynamics (Depraz, 2017; Desjardins, 2017; Girard, 2019; Gintrac & Mekdjian, 2014). Moreover, the concept's political implications have sparked concern, as it constructs a narrative of a divided France characterized by urban elites and marginalized working classes in the periphery. Critics warn that such a portrayal may inflame populist sentiments and exacerbate social and political tensions (Girard, 2019). Furthermore, there are concerns that the concept may inadvertently stigmatize the inhabitants of peripheral regions and reinforce negative stereotypes, potentially undermining efforts to address their socio-economic challenges (Gintrac & Mekdjian, 2014).

Despite the critiques, Guilluy's (2014) concept of the *France périphérique* remains valuable for approaching the peri-urban. The *France périphérique* is not solely defined by being located at the periphery of urban centres, but also by a "continuum" shaped by a common perception of inequalities shared by its inhabitants (Brookes & Cappellina, 2023). By moving beyond conventional categorizations, Guilluy's definition captures complex realities, recognizing that they cannot be neatly classified. Instead, these areas exist as hybrid spaces that defy traditional classifications, and rely on something more profound, an experiential commonality shared by their inhabitants. This shared experience is grounded in a perception of globalisation-induced inequalities and marginalisation (Brookes & Cappellina, 2023). It is not a simple geographical distinction but a socio-spatial reality, a complex interplay of economic, cultural, and social factors that shape the lives of those residing in the *France périphérique*, and by extension the peri-urban.

This perspective is further supported empirically by Žlender's (2021) study examining the perceptions and attitudes towards peri-urban landscapes. By employing focus groups and interviews across Ljubljana and Edinburgh, the study explores perceptions of peri-urban areas, identifying discrepancies between the views of decision-makers and those of the peri-urban landscape's users. It shows that these areas are perceived as unique entities with distinct needs and

characteristics, challenging traditional urban-rural distinctions (Žlender, 2021). The emphasis on diverse stakeholder perspectives in Žlender's (2021) work highlights the importance of understanding the nuanced realities of peri-urban areas, further validating Guilluy's (2014) approach to examining the peri-urban through a lens of socio-spatial experiential inequality and hybridity.

This nuanced perspective opened by Guilluy's (2014) *France périphérique* offers a platform for approaching the multifaceted nature of peri-urban peripheries and how they may be experienced by those living in them. Along these lines, I suggest the peri-urban cannot be neatly confined within rigid urban or rural categories. Instead, it represents a hybrid space produced by shared experiences of inequality and socio-economic disparities among its residents. Drawing on Guilluy's (2014) conceptualisation, we can gain valuable insights into how to approach and define these areas, emphasizing the need to move beyond traditional urban or rural classifications and to consider the socio-spatial complexities and the experiences that characterize the lives of those who inhabit them (see also Žlender, 2021). This perspective informs the approach taken in this thesis to understand and delineate the peri-urban periphery.

2.2 The peri-urban condition

A land of constraint?

The peri-urban France awoken in the protests by the Yellow Vests exposed a social world producing radically opposed discourses and social diagnostics compared to those emanating from the metropoles (Depraz, 2019a; Martin & Islar, 2021). Scholars have identified and explored various issues that underpin these distinct social diagnoses. For Depraz (2019a), the peri-urban France is one of limitations, especially with regards to restricted buying power. Like low-income groups in metropoles, the "end of the month" hangs over a great share of the peri-urban population, who, despite earning income, is faced with pre-committed expenses outside its control: taxes, rent, loan payments, phone subscriptions, water, gas, insurance, etc. Although general buying power has increased over the last decades, so have these costs, and exponentially so: rising from 12% to 30% of total income over half a century, increased fixed expenses have led to a substantial decline of what remains after the bills are paid (Durand, 2018; INSEE, 2017). For Depraz (2019a), this is where the key issue of the peri-urban discontent lies: pre-

committed expenses accumulate and claim more than a quarter of people's total income with the highest share in fuel and employment-linked mobility costs. Once celebrated for its affordability and perceived safety compared to urban centres and suburbs, the peri-urban has evolved into a space marked by constraints. The very attributes that once made it appealing – its distance from urban hustle and the promise of lower living costs – have become sources of challenge, as increased travel distances and rising living expenses eroded its initial advantages (Alonzo, 2005; Charmes, 2017; Marchal & Stébé, 2018).

Such constraint further bears implications for specifying which categories or "classes" we are talking about when discussing those experiencing the peri-urban condition. In French research, the categories inhabiting the French *périurbain* and experiencing such economic constraints have been associated with what is called the *classes populaires* (e.g. Gintrac & Mekdjian, 2014; Girard, 2019; Guilluy, 2014*)*. This term refers to a socio-economic category comprising individuals and households that are not necessarily impoverished but often live with economic constraints and limited possibilities of economic mobility. This category includes blue-collar workers, service industry employees, small business owners, and lower-level white-collar workers, and it is characterized by reliance on manual labour, service jobs, and lower-wage positions, frequently facing precarious employment conditions. The *classes populaires* are diverse, spanning various professions and living conditions, yet they may be argued to be unified by common experiences related to economic vulnerability and the struggles of daily life. This diversity was vividly represented by the Yellow Vests protesters, which brought together individuals from various socio-economic backgrounds, united by shared grievances related to taxation, cost of living, and perceived neglect by the government (Misset & Poullaouec, 2019).

Guilluy's (2014, 2018a) notion of *peripheral classes* extends this characterization. According to Guilluy, these classes are not defined solely by their economic status but rather by their shared experience of living in the *France périphérique* – geographically, economically, socially, and politically. This experience encompasses a sense of being left behind or excluded from the benefits of urban centrality and economic globalisation. Standing's (2011) concept of the *Precariat* resonates with this. The *Precariat* refers to a class-in-the-making, primarily defined not by occupation or income level but by the precarious nature of their labour and living conditions. It encompasses a broad spectrum of individuals who lack long-term job security, predictable income, and social benefits, leading to a life defined by experiences of uncertainty and instability. Sociologically entwined

with the *classes populaires*, the French peri-urban may then encompass not just a distinct socio-economic stratum but a mosaic of experiences marked by both economic vulnerability and aspirations for upward mobility. Although diverse, these categories are often united by shared aspirations and a collective struggle while inhabiting a space that was once seen as an opportunity but has increasingly become marked by its limitations and constraints.

The impact of deindustrialisation in former company towns and industrial strongholds is another dimension characterising the constraints of living in peri-urban peripheries (Depraz, 2017; Marchal & Stébé, 2018). As globalisation led to the relocation of industries out of minor towns and surrounding villages, these peri-urban areas have been most impacted through reduction in public services, economic activities, and increased mobility challenges. These areas, on the outskirts of former industrial powerhouses in the North-East and South-East, along with traditional textile and manufacturing centres like Montluçon, Roanne, and Saint-Étienne, represent the fringes where communities historically depended on local industries for jobs and access to essential services (Depraz, 2019a). The latter areas constitute the main setting for the ethnographic study of this thesis (Section 5.2). Their notable representation within the Yellow Vests' demographics underscores their social vulnerability, highlighting the discontent emanating from these regions left behind by economic shifts. Left out of globalisation dynamics, these peri-urban communities are disproportionately bearing the brunt of industrial decline, leading to heightened dissatisfaction with living conditions (Péron & Perona, 2018).

However, perceptions of peri-urban areas as solely socio-economically constrained spaces, do not enjoy universal consensus. Charmes (2019, 2020) to this extent presents a more nuanced outlook. He suggests that the social differentiation in peri-urban areas cannot be reduced to such fixed indicators. The reality is heterogeneous, and the definition of peri-urbanity itself remains fluid. While acknowledging social differentiation between urban centres and their peripheries, Charmes (2019, 2020) asserts that peri-urban areas are not the ones concentrating the highest poverty in comparison with urban suburbs for example (see also Guilluy, 2014, 2019). He argues that smaller and more rural villages within peri-urban regions often benefit economically from urban sprawl due to increased employment opportunities and better access to services. Nevertheless, Charmes (2019, 2020) identifies enduring challenges associated with the standardised development of activities at the periphery of small towns and the rapid expansion of housing subdivisions. These processes significantly influence the ways peri-

urban inhabitants conduct their daily lives. In Chapter 8, I will delve deeper into these impacts, empirically exploring how these processes shape the daily routines and mobility patterns of those living in peri-urban areas, thereby affecting their overall quality of life and social interactions. Charmes (2020) consequently suggests that the key issues in peri-urban living are more qualitative than quantitative in nature, necessitating a deeper exploration of the lived experiences invoked in these areas. Supporting this viewpoint, Žlender's (2021) characterisation of the peri-urban from the perspectives and attitudes of various individuals and groups adds support to the significance of these dimensions. These researchers underscore that the peri-urban cannot be adequately grasped through quantitative indicators alone.

My approach to the peri-urban is anchored within such perspective, acknowledging a less rigid sociological perception of peri-urban categories and that qualitative aspects of peri-urban living cannot be overlooked. By delving into the diverse human experiences and social dynamics of peri-urban areas, I suggest that we can gain a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities they present. This will be substantiated through both my theoretical and methodological approaches, developed in the next chapters, emphasising the relevance of lived experiences. My approach will to this effect underscore the significance the subjective experiences of residents and the evolving socio-spatial dynamics that constitute the peri-urban condition. Extending beyond quantitative metrics and categorical rigidity, this thesis aims to unravel the complex and evolving fabric of peri-urban experiences and shed light on the diverse narratives that unfold within them.

Peripheral status and recognition

Within a perspective emphasising qualitative and experiential dimensions, this thesis views the peri-urban as a space where residents experience a sense of reduced recognition, worth, and dignity, extending beyond purely economic considerations. It emphasizes that in peri-urban areas, individuals may not only grapple with economic constraints but also contend with the feeling of being unnoticed or undervalued within society. Such notion aligns with the 'cultural' character of the general backlash witnessed in European peripheries. Depending on the context, the experience of being left behind can manifest in various forms and can be rooted in grievances that transcend mere economic factors (Broz et al., 2019; Dijkstra et al., 2019; Hannemann et al., 2023; MacKinnon et al., 2022; McCann, 2020; Van Vulpen, 2023). The Yellow Vests provide an example of

this, as experiencing what Hannemann and colleagues (2023) term a "left behindness" that is not exclusive to being poor; and which emanate from an experience of being excluded from the rest of society (see also Abdelal, 2020). In other words, voicing such experience may not simply emerge as a response to material aspects of income distribution, it may involve claims and feelings of being unrecognised or undervalued (Defossez & Fassin, 2013, 2019).

This perspective is further reinforced by Fukuyama (2018), who emphasises the role of recognition in understanding the rise of social discontent and "backlashes" in liberal democracies (see also Abdelal, 2020). He posits that contemporary political and social dynamics are shaped by the pursuit of equal recognition among diverse groups, and he contends that Western liberal democracies struggle to deliver on the commitment to equal recognition for all, thereby contributing to a sense of displacement and social discontent. The desire for recognition pertains to an individual's dignity and status in society. In other words, to experience marginalisation is not simply contingent to being poor; it is also related to a feeling of being invisible, not recognised in society. Abdelal (2020) confirms this argument in relation to the Yellow Vests protests:

> It is not just about the money […], [money] cannot buy dignity or status. If it could, then France would not be facing an even worse backlash against globalisation (Abdelal, 2020, p.493).

However, one should not completely dismiss the significance of economic factors in demand for recognition. Buying power was a crux of the Yellow Vests' discontent, which grounded feelings of powerlessness to make the "end of the month" (Martin & Islar, 2021). In the words of some:

> Once the rent, groceries and gas are paid for, there is nothing left.
> (a protester quoted in Fourquet & Manternach, 2018, p.6);

> I can't even take my kids to the cinema… (a protester quoted in Gorce, 2019)

Inability to afford "small pleasures" serves as a social marker, symbolising a slide down the social ladder (Fourquet, 2019b). Demands for recognition can in this way also arise because of declining buying power, which results in individuals becoming less visible in a consumer-oriented society. In developed economies, such as France, the ability to exercise purchasing power distinguishes active and participating citizens from those on the margins (Fourquet et al., 2019; Fourquet

& Manternach, 2018). For individuals in lower-income brackets, the erosion of buying power raises questions about their status as fully engaged members of society and their visibility within it. Historically, it has been the middle classes rather than the poorest who have been most politically disruptive, as they experience a sense of diminished status and recognition relative to other groups, as illustrated by events like the French Revolution (e.g. Alpaugh, 2014; Huntington, 2004).

Based on this, I approach the issue of recognition within the peri-urban condition as encompassing both material and symbolic dimensions. This view on recognition informs my analysis by emphasizing that a loss of status can intensify a sense of political-spatial and symbolic marginalisation. This perspective combines interrelated dimensions to approach the peri-urban as a space of multifaceted relegation, offering a deeper understanding of the socio-economic, political, symbolic, and experiential aspects of the condition of what Hanneman et al. (2023) term "left behindness." This holistic approach allows for an exploration of the multifaceted nature of marginalisation and its impact on community identity and individual self-perception in these areas.

2.3 A peripheralized France?

From peripheralization…

The peri-urban, positioned at the fringes of dynamic cities, involves not only spatial peripherality but also a multidimensional process of marginalisation, as discussed in the previous section. This characterisation further aligns with what Kühn (2015) defines as "peripheralization," which describes a process operated relationally bearing spatial implications (Kühn, 2015, p.374). This process is not isolated to physical spaces but is connected to the broader relational dynamics between central areas and their peripheries, affecting how these peripheral areas are developed, perceived, and lived in. Beyond spatial and economic considerations, peripheralization suggests that the peri-urban can be produced and perceived as a *periphery* (see also Eriksson, 2008; Kühn, 2015; Willett, 2019). To this extent, the peri-urban may be argued to involve more than a spatial category or a mere zone of socio-economic constraint; it embodies an active process of marginalisation. This process is multifaceted, influenced by a variety of factors including policy decisions, economic shifts, and social trends that

collectively contribute to the peripheralization of these areas. Consequently, the peri-urban becomes a dynamic participant in its own marginalisation, shaped by and shaping the relational dynamics with urban centres, which in turn affects its development, perception, and the everyday realities of its inhabitants. Thus, the peri-urban should be understood not just as a static space but as an active process that continually evolves as it interacts with the forces that define marginality.

Additionally, the socio-spatial decline of peri-urban areas may be compounded by symbolic relegation, particularly affecting the middle classes, whose once-desirable status has been disrupted by globalisation, deindustrialisation, and socio-spatial exclusion (Bruneau et al., 2018; Girard, 2019; Guilluy, 2019; Misset & Poullaouec, 2019). From desirable to deplorable, living in the peri-urban and belonging to the "middle class" is not anymore synonymous to social ascension (Fourquet, 2019a, 2020). For Guilluy (2018b), social conflict is now polarised between a dominant metropolitan set of values, and a "symbolic otherness" depicting populations living in the peripheries. This recalls several studies on the persistence of peripheries in relation to how they are negatively represented by centres in other countries. While this is not central to the analysis I will pursue in Part III, it is significant to note these relevant outlooks on 'internal othering' processes in which peripheries are perceived, imagined and produced as such by outsiders, for example in Swedish Norrland (Eriksson, 2008), Finland (Vepsäläinen & Pitkänen, 2010) and Cornwall in the UK (Willett & Lang, 2018).

In France, such process is exemplified through the framing distinction between the periphery and metropoles using the metaphorical contrast of "France from *Above* and *Below.*" This distinction was initially introduced by French Prime Minister Raffarin in 2002, following a contentious presidential election and the unprecedented rise of the far-right (Rémi-Giraud, 2005). Since then, the distinction has been a recurring theme in French political discourse, with *Below* denoting marginalized groups who feel undervalued by socialist platforms and turn to far-right parties that seem more attuned to their daily struggles (Bourdin & Torre, 2023; Misset & Poullaouec, 2019; Paugam et al., 2017; Piketty & Cagé, 2023). In collective imaginations, the *Below* symbolises a reaction against the misrecognition from the *Above*, which is seen as too distant from the "people of small means" (Guilluy, 2018b), highlighting a symbolic frontier between 'us' (the people) and 'them' (the elites). This symbolic representation of the periphery as "France from Below" may be argued to contribute to its growing invisibility and misrecognition (Paugam et al., 2017; Guilluy, 2018b), and fuelling electoral support for so-called 'populist' party agendas. Following Mudde's (2004)

definition of populism as a "thin ideology" (Section 1.1), we can identify the spark of the 'France from Below' as a way to challenge this process of peripheralization from 'Above.' Cut out from metropolitan dynamics, facing a crisis of the welfare state, and the rise of identity-related tensions, French peri-urban populations are engaging into resistance to preserve their shrinking social and symbolic capital (Masclet, 2019; Misset & Poullaouec, 2019).

… to separation?

Kühn's (2015) relational perspective on peripheralization invokes one of the consequences of how a periphery is experienced by its inhabitants. In addition to the loss of visibility and symbolic downgrading, living in the peri-urban areas can also be characterized by a sense of isolation, contingent to physical and social separation and a decline in social connections (Charmes, 2017; Marchal & Stébé, 2017, 2018). As mentioned earlier, the peri-urban, once promoted as "opportune urbanism," has fallen victim to its own success, turning into a distant land of economic constraints. While it offers cheaper individual properties away from increasingly unstable suburbs, the distance from city centres results in higher living expenses and costly transportation.

The same can be said for the opportunities of social interactions: by increasing distance away from centres, the peri-urban may condition a life devoid of social relationships. It may be marked by isolation, where social interactions become costly as individuals are physically distant from one another. Marchal & Stebé (2018) emphasize this "boomerang effect" of the peri-urban life (see also Charmes, 2009; Marchal, 2017; Marchal & Stébé, 2017). In peri-urban areas, social interactions often lack the frequency and proximity found within urban centres, contrasting with the sometimes intense and constant social engagement of densely populated city centres. This growing physical and social separation in peri-urban areas may amplify the social and symbolic relegation of inhabitants and their experiences of isolation and being left behind, a central theme that I will develop further in the next chapters. My empirical exploration will illuminate the dynamics that underpin the peri-urban experience, underscoring the peri-urban as a realm of isolation and marginalisation that impacts the lives and social connections of its inhabitants.

As I will develop more analytically in this thesis, the peri-urban to a significant degree operates a process of separation which manifests in multiple ways within the lives of those inhabiting it. Such position relies on several arguments that I develop as followed. Firstly, there is a tangible physical separation due to the

spatial distance between peri-urban areas and city centres (e.g. Alonzo, 2005; De Jarcy & Remy, 2010; Houk et al., 1996; Lussault, 2019). Urban sprawl and the growing demand for affordable housing have led to the development of peri-urban areas on the outskirts of urban spaces. This spatial separation imposes longer commuting distances and higher transportation costs for peri-urban residents to access employment, services, and social amenities located in the urban core (Marchal & Stébé, 2018).

Secondly, the peri-urban environment can foster a sense of social separation among its inhabitants (Charmes, 2019). The dispersed nature of peri-urban settlements, characterized by low population density and fragmented land use patterns, can limit opportunities for social interactions and community cohesion. Unlike the dense and bustling urban centres, where social relationships are often formed through proximity and shared spaces, the peri-urban tends to prioritize individualistic lifestyles and private spaces. This can lead to a lack of communal gathering places, such as parks, plazas, or community centres, which are essential for fostering social connections and a sense of belonging (Charmes, 2009; Marchal, 2017b; Marchal & Stébé, 2017).

Thirdly, these separative dynamics may further exacerbate the social separation between different groups. As urban centres become increasingly unaffordable and gentrified, lower-income households are pushed to the peri-urban fringes. This spatial segregation perpetuates social inequalities and create pockets of deprivation and exclusion. The lack of access to quality services, educational opportunities, healthcare facilities, and cultural amenities in peri-urban areas further deepens the sense of social marginalisation (Guilluy, 2013, 2018a). This resulting separation in the peri-urban context carries substantial implications for individuals' well-being and their ability to integrate socially. Experiences of isolation, reduced social support networks, and limited access to resources and opportunities often result from this experienced disconnection from urban centres. This can, in turn, contribute to a sense of being left behind or overlooked by the broader society, fuelling social discontent and grievances (Guilluy, 2018a).

I suggest here that recognizing and addressing this separation process is significant for understanding the peri-urban and how it is experienced by its inhabitants. As we will progress through the empirical chapters of this thesis (Part III), I will conduct a deeper exploration of these experiences of isolation and marginalisation within peri-urban landscapes. These experiences, I will argue, are intricately linked to the grievances articulated by the Yellow Vests protesters on roundabouts. By thoroughly understanding how the peri-urban shapes the lives and perceptions of

its residents, we can gain valuable insights into the multifaceted factors that underlie the social discontent often encountered by peri-urban communities.

* * *

This chapter emphasized the necessity of conceiving the peri-urban in plural terms, acknowledging its complexity and diversity. While there are ongoing debates and controversies concerning the definition and character of the French peri-urban, academic discourses align on its hybridity and dynamics of marginalisation and separation. The various accounts I have discussed offer key insights into the challenges and experiences faced by inhabitants in these areas. They illustrate how the peri-urban spatiality significantly contributes to socio-economic, political, and symbolic marginalisation, which separative dynamics overall may foster a sense of isolation. Living in these areas not only limits the chances for meaningful social interactions but also exacerbates feelings of socio-economic exclusion and a lack of societal recognition, which in turn may serve as a catalyst for social discontent.

As we move into Part II, the focus shifts to the development of my theoretical and methodological frameworks that will guide my understanding of peri-urban life and my analysis of the lived experiences and social relations that shape it.

Part II

Approaching peri-urban life: theory, concepts, and methodology

3. Theorising peri-urban life

> It may be the best of times and the worst of times to be studying cities, for while there is so much that is new and challenging to respond to, there is much less agreement than ever before as to how best to make sense, practically and theoretically, of the new urban worlds being created.
>
> – Soja (2000, p.xii)

As Soja (2000) observed, human geographers are faced with an era of urban transformations that challenge our theoretical and practical understandings. These challenges are evident when approaching peri-urban spaces, where traditional dichotomies of city and country blur into complex socio-spatial formations and experiences. Exploring peri-urban life in light of such shifts presents a significant task and requires a theoretical framework that acknowledges spatial conditions and dynamics. This is particularly pertinent when peri-urban experiences are actively challenged and reshaped, as exemplified by the case of the Yellow Vests and the focus of this research.

Resting on a critical phenomenological lens developed by scholars such as Simonsen & Koefoed (2020) and Kinkaid (2020), and rooted in Lefebvrian critical urban theory, I approach peri-urban life as a relational process emerging through expressions and contestations of lived experiences. This perspective merges critical phenomenology's emphasis on embodied subjectivity with Lefebvre's (1974/1991) notion of space as socially produced, engaging with peri-urban life as an arena where social relations, power dynamics, and spatial practices converge and are actively negotiated. This entails a view of the peri-urban not only as space shaping experiences, but also approaching these experiences as a platform for empowerment and change through the agency of those living in it. This chapter, therefore, explores the intersection between lived experience, spatial production, and the potential for transformative agency within the peri-urban context as an active site of social and spatial negotiation.

The purpose of this chapter is to lay the foundations of my theoretical approach to the peri-urban and its life, and it is the first step of a two-part process that will be further refined and operationalized in Chapter 4. In this chapter, I will first delineate the core theoretical tenets of my approach (Section 3.1), which draws on Lefebvrian critical urban theory (Section 3.2) and critical phenomenology (Section 3.3). This offers a lens through which peri-urban life is viewed as a complex tapestry of human experiences, interactions, and transformations. This overarching theoretical reflection paves the way for Chapter 4, which develops these insights into an operationalizable research framework focusing on the concept of encounter.

3.1 Peri-urban life: a theoretical approach

Theoretical journey

Before delving into the specifics of the theoretical framework presented in this chapter, it is essential to acknowledge the evolutionary nature of its development. At the inception of my research journey, I embraced the understanding that research design is a fluid and evolving process, as highlighted by Cresswell & Poth (2017) and Denzin & Lincoln (2018). I did not indeed initially possess a complete blueprint for constructing both the theoretical, conceptual, and methodological frameworks that would guide this study. While my intentions were clear – to explore the intricacies of peri-urban life, including its struggles, voices, and nuances – the path to defining the precise contours of my approach was far from linear. This exploratory dimension underscores the organic and dynamic relationship between my research objectives, the empirics, and the theoretical underpinnings that ultimately emerged.

The development of my theoretical stance has been deeply influenced by my empirical work on the Yellow Vests' demonstrations and their occupation of roundabouts. These protests served not only as an empirical entry point but also shaped the theoretical lens through which I am approaching this peri-urban "life" and its dynamics. It became apparent to me that the "life" being expressed and contested in these settings was not static; it was being reshaped by those living it. The grievances voiced by the Yellow Vests, rooted in peri-urban experiences, highlighted the need for a theoretical framework dynamic enough to capture these

lived experiences and their peri-urban spatial context, as well as their potential to evolve as they were actively challenged.

This research, to a significant extent, owes its shape to an iterative process where theory and empirical data engaged in a continuous and reciprocal dialogue (Morgan & Nica, 2020; Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009, 2018). The theoretical framework presented herein is not a static construct but a dynamic one, shaped by the insights gained from empirical investigations and, conversely, influencing the direction of empirical inquiries (see also Chapter 5). Representing this iterative theoretical development within the linear structure of a thesis has been challenging. The frameworks discussed here, and in subsequent chapters, are not fixed starting points; they are shaped by and influential to the empirical work, requiring meticulous crafting to ensure a coherent, logically progressive narrative that reflects the evolving nature of the research process.

Approaching a "lived" space

My theoretical approach to peri-urban life is guided by the perspective that the Yellow Vests' voiced grievances are intricately tied to their peri-urban condition, and how in their protests they ultimately forged new relationships, experiences, and political dynamics. Such perspective may be argued to signify a broader social-spatial phenomenon which illustrates how lived experiences in peri-urban spaces can both involve contingent struggles as much as catalysing new forms of social relations and politics. This suggests peri-urban life as a dynamic process, one that evolves as much as it is shaped by the people who experience it.

In this research, I consequently approach peri-urban life as the *lived* peri-urban, as a socio-spatial "triadic" process that is dynamically experienced, contested, and finally transformed, and which evolves from one quality to another (Figure 3.1). By this, I posit that peri-urban life, contingent to the production of the space it emanates from, is marked by the experiences and grievances articulated by the Yellow Vests protesters. It entails more than a passive condition, as it embodies a series of lived experiences that give rise to struggles and contestations that, in turn, reciprocally contribute to the ongoing transformation of these experiences.

Accordingly, the aim of my approach is to explore the lived experiences invoked by peri-urban life, and understanding how these experiences are shaped by their peri-urban spatiality. Simultaneously, my approach seeks to understand how these lived experiences are subject to transformation once contested. This inquiry overall focuses on capturing both the experiential fabric of peri-urban life and

what it means to live in such space, as much as its potential for change by those living it.

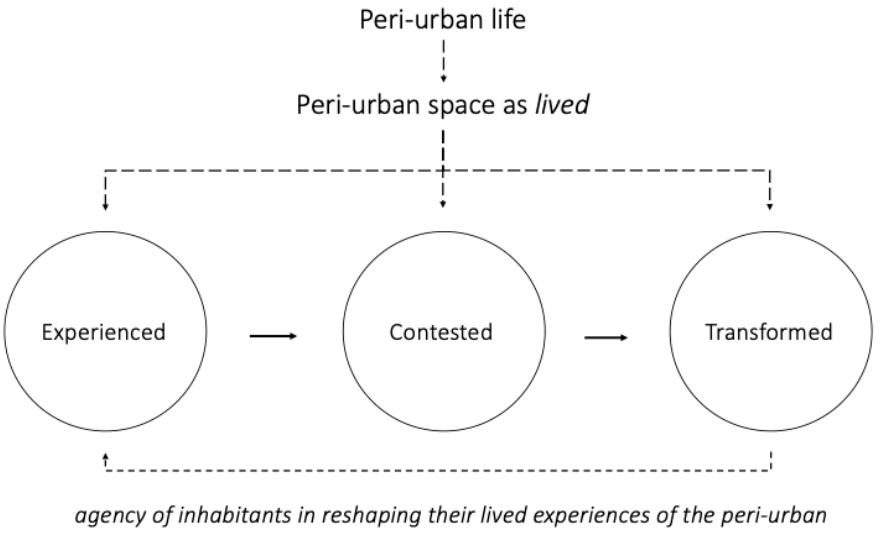


Figure 3.1
The peri-urban as *lived*: a dynamic approach to peri-urban life as experienced, contested and transformed. Source: author

This approach therefore anchors the thesis' research question:

How is peri-urban life lived, and how is it experienced, contested, and transformed by those living it?

Building on this, I understand peri-urban life as a socio-spatial condition that is dynamically *lived*, which further involves recognizing the peri-urban as an inhabited space where personal and collective experiences directly shape and are shaped by the physical and social environment (see Lefebvre, 1974/1991; Section 3.2). Specifically, the peri-urban approached as *lived* here relates to living a given spatiality. It is understood as continually constructed and expressed through the practices, experiences, and actions of those living the peri-urban, echoing Lefebvre's (1974/1991) conceptualisation of space as *lived* (*espace vécu*) within his *spatial triad* (Section 3.2). Such conceptualisation has been further supported by critical geographers like Soja (1996, 2000) and Massey (1991, 2005), who argue that spaces are not static but are continuously made and remade through human

interrelations. Resting on this Lefebvrian perspective, my approach to the peri-urban space emphasises its dynamic and *lived* dimensions, recognising it as evolving and produced by individual and collective narratives, socio-political engagements, and daily life routines that form their social fabric.

The theoretical significance of this perspective further lies in its ability to illuminate micro-level interactions and practices that contribute to a macro-level understanding of peri-urban spaces and the life they may condition. Such stance is informed by Bourdieu (1977, 1990) and Giddens' (1984) respective structuration theories, which both posit that social practices and the structure of society are interdependent, shaping and being shaped by one another. This interplay between agency and structure supports my understanding of the reciprocal relationship between peri-urban space and the lived experiences of those who navigate and transform it.

Acknowledging such reciprocal relationship between space and experiences, I subsequently approach the peri-urban *lived* as a site of contestation, where individuals engage with and challenge prevailing structural forces (Lefebvre 1974/1991, Section 3.2). This perspective to this extent underscores the dynamic nature of peri-urban spaces, revealing them as arenas where inhabitants' agency plays a crucial role in contesting and transforming their spatial environment according to their experiences, needs and visions. Ultimately, both contestation and transformation of peri-urban life are rooted in its *lived* dimension. As inhabitants navigate, negotiate, and contest their realities, they can initiate changes that redefine the space they live in and their experience. This transformative potential underscores the peri-urban *lived* as a site of both resistance and creation, in which lived experiences are not merely symptoms of broader processes but are active forces in ongoing evolutions of these spaces. The peri-urban *lived*, therefore, is a tapestry of lived experiences, woven through the embodied practices and everyday politics of those who live it. It is in this weaving process that the theoretical richness of the *lived* peri-urban unfolds, revealing a complex interplay between lived experiences, agency, spatial structures, and socio-political dynamics.

A Lefebvrian-inspired critical phenomenological approach

Approaching the peri-urban as *lived,* my theoretical framework emerges from a Lefebvrian-inspired critical phenomenological perspective, which views space as a product of social processes, with particular attention to how individuals' perceptions, experiences, and actions continuously create and transform their

environments. Combining Lefebvre's (1970/2003; 1974/1991) theory of the social production of space with a phenomenological emphasis on lived experience, critical phenomenology examines the power dynamics and societal structures that shape spatial realities, while advocating for an understanding of space that is rooted in the everyday lives and embodied experiences of people (e.g. Kinkaid, 2020; Salamon, 2018; Simonsen, 2013; Simonsen & Koefoed, 2020). Applying such lens enables a nuanced exploration where the socio-spatiality of the peri-urban fabric is woven through interaction and experience. This approach foregrounds the agency of peri-urban inhabitants as they navigate, challenge, and redefine their experiences of the space they live in against the backdrop of broader societal forces. It allows for an analysis of how peri-urban life functions not just as conditioned by its spatiality but as an arena of social action and meaning-making, where the personal and collective narratives intersect with and influence the physical landscape and its experience. Through this lens, peri-urban life is understood as an active process of social construction, where the spaces are as much a product of the inhabitants' lives as their lives are a product of the spaces they inhabit.

This approach involves a view of individuals as active participants with the capacity to understand, interpret, and alter their spatial conditions, thereby challenging and potentially transforming prevailing patterns (e.g. Cresswell, 1996; Harvey, 2013; Lefebvre, 1991; Massey, 2005; Simonsen & Koefoed, 2020; Soja, 1996). Through such a lens, peri-urban life is thus seen as a platform where struggles are not only experienced but can also become catalysts for change, reflecting a dynamic interplay between human agency and socio-spatial forces. This involves a relational ontology, treating the peri-urban as a dynamic, ever-evolving construct, inherently shaped by human experiences, interactions, and social relations (Lefebvre, 1974/1991; Kinkaid, 2020; Simonsen, 2005; see also Massey, 1991). In this framework, the *lived* peri-urban is not an inert or static backdrop; it is a vibrant, living entity, continuously produced, and redefined through human engagement. This perspective aligns with the notion that space is socially produced, emphasizing that understandings of spatialities are incomplete without considering the lived experiences, the social practices, and the intricate web of relationships that define it (Lefebvre, 1974/1991; Kinkaid, 2020; Simonsen, 2005; Massey, 1991; Cresswell, 1996).

Moreover, this perspective emphasizes the role of embodiment in understanding spatial dynamics. The peri-urban *lived* is not just experienced visually or cognitively; it is felt and navigated through the body (e.g. Simonsen, 2005;

Simonsen & Koefoed, 2020). Bodily experiences, from the mundane to the extraordinary, become crucial in understanding how peri-urban spaces may be perceived, experienced, and ultimately shaped. This focus on *embodiment* aligns specifically with the critical phenomenological framework, which posits that the lived experiences and bodily interactions of individuals with their environment are central (e.g. Kinkaid, 2020; Simonsen & Koefoed, 2020). This allows for an experientially sensitive understanding of the peri-urban as *lived*. It recognizes that it is not a static entity but rather continuously made and remade through the lived and embodied experiences of their inhabitants.

Expanding upon this Lefebvrian-inspired critical phenomenological foundation, the following sections will unfold in more details these theoretical strands underpinning my exploration of peri-urban life as a *lived* space, that is experienced, contested, and transformed.

In Section 3.2, the discussion will first address how one may approach the *lived* dimension of a space, in this case the peri-urban, as an experience contingent to the production of such space. Anchored within Lefebvrian critical urban theory (e.g. Brenner et al., 2011; Lefebvre, 1970/2003, 1974/1991), this understanding posits that lived experiences within a space do not exist in a vacuum but are intrinsically tied to the broader process of spatial production.

In Section 3.3, I will refine this theoretical backdrop by focusing on critical phenomenological perspectives illuminating the embodied experiences of individuals (e.g. Kinkaid, 2020, 2021; Salamon, 2018; Simonsen, 2005; Simonsen & Koefoed, 2020). This underscores the importance of human agency and the subjective experiences of space, extending the Lefebvrian structural perspective. Critical phenomenology, with its emphasis on the lived experience, will to this extent be brought as a nuancing lens through which I understand the ways in which peri-urban spaces are not only constructed physically and socially but are also experienced emotionally and sensorially. It considers how those living the peri-urban may then navigate and contest their spaces, imbuing them with distinct politics and engaging in practices that reflect their desires, needs, and aspirations. This approach reveals the transformative potential within the peri-urban *lived*, where lived experiences can challenge and reshape the spatial configurations imposed by broader urbanisation processes.

3.2 Lefebvrian beginnings

Thinking the peri-urban critically

In my approach, I first acknowledge the peri-urban as a dynamic construct, where the understanding of its various dimensions and potential transformations is broadly inspired by a dialectical mode of thought. Rooted within the philosophy of Hegel (1812/2010; see also Maybee, 2016) and Marx (1867/1976; see also Lovato, 2016), dialectical thinking is about recognizing that reality is in a constant state of flux, and it seeks to grasp the ever-changing nature of things (see also Marchand, 1978; Sheppard, 2008; Swyngedouw, 2009). Critical human geographers have embraced such modes of thinking as a powerful tool to scrutinize the intricate relationships between space, society, and power dynamics (e.g. Brenner et al., 2011; Cresswell, 1996; Dawdy, 2016; Hart, 2018; Harvey, 2001; Lefebvre, 1991; Low, 2017; McFarlane & Silver, 2017; Simonsen, 2022). Here, thinking dialectically recognizes that space is not a fixed entity but an ever-evolving one, where diverse elements intermingle dynamically.

Within the peri-urban context, such perspective prompts an exploration of the interplay between different qualities: how the peri-urban is lived, how grievances emanating from such lived experiences can lead to contestation and transformation, and how these processes are all interrelated and evolving. This mode of thinking encourages my approach to the peri-urban *lived* not merely as a continually evolving phenomenon, but also as a context in which individuals possess agency and the potential to instigate change. The case of Yellow Vests may exemplify this dynamism, as they contest grievances tied to their peri-urban experiences, effectively transforming their experiential condition.

Proposing the peri-urban as a dynamic entity, my theoretical approach is rooted in critical urban theory, particularly drawing from the Lefebvrian tradition, which focuses on unearthing and examining the social and political dimensions of urban life. Critical urban theory, as outlined by Brenner et al. (2011), seeks to uncover how urban spaces are produced, governed, and experienced, aiming to expose power structures and to propose a critical agenda for urban worlds designed "for people, not for profit" (Brenner et al., 2011). Tracing its origins to the critical theory of the Frankfurt School (Horkheimer, 1972; Marcuse, 1964) and Marx's (1867/1976) critique of capitalism, critical urban theory challenges dominant ideologies and cultural norms that perpetuate urban disparities, while revealing the contradictions that sustain them (Brenner et al., 2011). It aspires to chart

paths toward alternative urbanisation forms that challenge capitalist accumulation (Harvey, 1973, 2013) and the alienation of urban residents (Lefebvre, 1968/1974; 1970/2003). In essence, such thinking pursues a "revolutionary" and transformative agenda to expose injustices in capitalist urbanisation and promote democratic, equitable, and sustainable urban development (see also Brenner, 2019; Brenner et al., 2011; Merrifield, 2002, 2013).

While critical urban theory often carries a revolutionary zeal aimed at redressing urban inequities and fostering democratic spaces, my position adopts a more reflective stance, resonating with Marcuse's (2010) nuanced interpretation of critical theory and its ideology through his examination of the Tea Parties and platforms of discontent. In his analysis, Marcuse emphasizes critical theory's role extends beyond critique, and he argues that it also involves understanding the origins and expressions of societal unrest, and so to be probed "from below" (Marcuse, 2010, p.366), specifically within the everyday. Importantly, his critical approach does not imply neither an endorsement nor a delegitimation of the studied group's views or ideologies. Rather, it acknowledges that "their unrest need to be recognised as valid" (Marcuse, 2010, p.366), even when they do not align with the ideological foundations of critical theory. In a similar vein, my approach to studying the Yellow Vests is not to ignite revolutionary change but to critically comprehend the underlying grievances and aspirations that stem from their lived experiences. My stance aligns with Marcuse's (2010) argument for a critical theory that engages with the real-life challenges and discontents of people, aiming to elucidate rather than solely transform.

Within the Lefebvrian tradition, some critical urban theorists further underscore the importance of a reflexive perspective on lived experiences, advocating for a critical engagement aligned with "emergent urban conditions and ongoing urban transformations" (Brenner & Schmid, 2015, p.161; see also Lefebvre 1970/2003, 1968/1974). By focusing on daily life and experiences, their approaches delve into the heart of urban dynamics, revealing the power structures, social relations, and conflicts that may influence the urban landscape and how it may be experienced (Lefebvre 1970/2003). This directs attention to context, research situatedness, and a healthy scepticism toward authoritative binary conceptualizations of the urban experience (Brenner & Schmid, 2015).

In this thesis, I take my point of departure in such broad positionings to approach the French peri-urban as a socially produced and contested space that is shaped by a multitude of forces – political, social, economic, cultural – manifested from and within the level of the everyday. This perspective allows to move beyond the

simplistic binary categorization of urban and rural and understand the peri-urban as a dynamic and multifaceted space. Emphasizing the peri-urban as such further involves perceiving it as the site of ongoing social and political struggles. It implies that it is not just a backdrop to people's lives but an integral part of their everyday experiences. It is where social relations are formed, where power dynamics play out, and where contestations and negotiations occur. Furthermore, this allows for the recognition of the agency of the people who experience, inhabit, and interact within the peri-urban, recognizing it as a "space defined by the people who use, appropriate, and transform it through their daily routines and practices" (Brenner & Schmid, 2015, p.171). Individuals are not passive actors but active participants in experiencing and shaping the peri-urban space. By understanding the peri-urban as a dynamic entity, we can reflexively appreciate the role of its inhabitants in both contesting and shaping it. This, finally, offers an opening to the lived experiences of people in such space, understanding how they navigate the challenges and opportunities presented by the peri-urban condition. It opens avenues for reimagining peri-urban realities where their voices and needs are central and recognised as valid.

Thinking the peri-urban as "lived"

Advancing from the broad tenets of critical urban theory, I narrow down the focus onto my approach to the lived experiences of peri-urban inhabitants and how they may engage with the challenges and prospects of the space they live in. This position is rooted in Lefebvrian theory, which places everyday life at the forefront of understanding urban spaces. This perspective steers my approach to the peri-urban as *lived*, providing a lens through which this space can be seen as not just physically lived in, but as a dynamic arena where struggles and opportunities are actively navigated and negotiated by its inhabitants. This perspective involves a shift from abstract concepts of urban development to the lived experiences of those within the peri-urban, emphasizing their agency in the continual process of shaping their environment.

To first understand the peri-urban as a space, my approach rests on Lefebvre's (1970/2003) argument that urbanisation, a key force in modern capitalist societies, transforms urban spaces into commodities essential for production and capital generation. This process, he terms as *urban revolution*, leads to the homogenization of urban spaces, eroding unique activities and interactions, and extending beyond urban centres to influence nearby rural areas. As a result, these areas are turned into what he refers to as "colonies of the metropolis" (Lefebvre,

1970/2003, p.4). This perspective is pivotal in understanding the peri-urban as a manifestation of urbanisation's expanding influence. It aligns with contemporary critical urban theories that view the emergence of "non-urban spaces" like suburbs and exurbs as integral to urban dynamics and domination processes (e.g. Brenner, 2016). Lefebvre's (1970/2003) critique is particularly insightful for approaching the French peri-urban as a *lived* space shaped by processes of urbanisation and the resulting social and spatial dynamics.

Moreover, this position sheds light on the contingent impact such process may have on the lives of peri-urban inhabitants. Indeed, central to Lefebvre's spatial critique lies the impact of urban homogenization on everyday life and its commodification, as it reduces the diversity of physical environments and imposes predetermined and restricted ways of experiencing space (Lefebvre, 1947-1961-1981/2014). This leads to the erosion of vital public spaces for the rich social interactions and encounters that urban life once offered. These processes breed a pervasive sense of alienation and separation from the urban environment, enforcing a standardized and inflexible way of using and experiencing space (see Section 4.2). Lefebvre's critique underscores everyday life as a critical arena where the forces of urbanisation and capitalism shape social relations, production, and consumption. As I will suggest in this thesis, that is echoed in the contemporary peri-urban experience.

To this extent, my framework rests on Lefebvre's theory of the *production of space* to approach how peri-urban lived experiences are shaped and influenced by broader processes of spatial production. Lefebvre (1974/1991) conceptualises the impact of urbanisation into everyday life through his dialectical spatial triad, which examines space in its *conceived*, *perceived*, and *lived* dimensions, highlighting the interplay between power relations, social practices, and representational processes. Within such interplays, he argues, domination often occurs as the *conceived*, driven by power structures and urban planning agendas, overrides the *perceived* and *lived* dimensions of space, thereby dictating how spaces are physically produced and experienced (Lefebvre, 1974/1991). This top-down dynamic can lead to a disconnection between how space is structured and how it is experienced by the people living in it, potentially marginalizing the latter's needs and relationships with the space (Lefebvre, 1974/1991). Within this framework, the *lived* space becomes a critical site for the Lefebvrian critique, representing the arena where capitalist forces are enacted, observed, and struggled with, but also potentially challenged. Here, individuals experience and resist dominant power relations through everyday practices and experiences, making the *lived* space a

fertile ground for contestation and transformation of space production (Lefebvre, 1974/1991).

Thus, for Lefebvre (1974/1991), *lived* space is not just the backdrop of everyday life; it is the fertile ground where contestation and transformation of the production of space can germinate and grow. In this sense, *lived* space becomes the space where the forces of capitalism are not only enacted but also exposed and challenged. Everyday life, in this context, evolves into the very site of the critique of these forces; a site where individuals engage in contestation and struggle against them. Approached as a *lived* space, I understand accordingly the peri-urban *lived* as where possibilities for contestation and transformation of its production may take root, and where individuals' daily experiences and practices are influenced by the complex interplay of power relations and spatial dynamics.

The issue of how to operationalise and further develop this research agenda remains, however, as Lefebvre's work falls short in providing concrete guidance for how to engage with *lived* spaces in practical ways (e.g. Goonewardena et al., 2008; Merrifield, 1993; Pierce & Martin, 2015; Ronneberger, 2008). Nonetheless, scholars like Kinkaid (2020, 2021) and Simonsen (2005) have attempted to operationalise the Lefebvrian perspective within their critical phenomenological approaches, and they do so by emphasising the importance of the body. This provides a means of accessing the experiential qualities of space that Lefebvre's structuralist approach neglects. Critical phenomenological perspectives extend Lefebvre's theory of space to the body, offering practical guidance for engaging with and transforming *lived* spaces. In the next section, I anchor my framework within critical phenomenology to understand the experiential engagement with the peri-urban space and further approach in a more practically its potential for change.

3.3 Embodying peri-urban life: the framework of critical phenomenology

Critical phenomenologists' extensions of Lefebvre's theories to the body offer valuable ways to bridge the gap between the abstract and the practical aspects of spatial relations, and provide a theoretical tool to approach the dynamics of lived experiences within peri-urban spaces. By integrating Lefebvre's theories with a focus on *embodiment*, critical phenomenology enriches my understanding of how

the peri-urban space may be both experienced and challenged by individuals. This framework emphasizes the bodily and sensory dimensions of space, recognizing that human experiences, interactions, and perceptions are central to the formation and transformation of spatial dynamics and its politics. It allows for an exploration of how those experiencing the peri-urban engage with their environment, not just at a physical or conceptual level, but in a manner that is intimately connected to their daily lives, emotions, and identities.

Bridging space and the "lived" with the embodied

Critical phenomenology combines critical theory and phenomenology to analyse social phenomena from an embodied perspective. It acknowledges the body's active role in shaping perceptions and experiences, emphasising the inseparable relationship between the body and its environment. This approach delves into how social, cultural, and political factors shape individual experiences and perceptions of the world. Therefore, the *body* serves as a conduit for accessing the *lived*; as the site where individuals experience and interact with their environment (Simonsen, 2005). Joining together the Lefebvrian spatial analysis with a focus on embodied experiences, critical phenomenological geographies explores how social and political forces produce these spatially-conditioned experiences through bodily sensations, emotions, and spatial practices (e.g. Kinkaid, 2020, 2021; Simonsen & Koefoed, 2020).

The roots of critical phenomenology lie in traditional phenomenology and its core principle of *intentionality*, as introduced by Husserl (1932/1962). This concept suggests that consciousness is always directed towards something, shaping our experiences based on our focus in the world. This was further developed by phenomenologists like Heidegger (1926/1956) and Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012), who emphasized a first-person perspective to unearth the subjective layers of human experience. This ontological stance involves a shift from documentation of what appears in consciousness to a deeper engagement with how these appearances are interpreted and understood by subjects in interaction with their environments. This involves an exploration of how people perceive, interpret, and ascribe meanings to their experiences in the world. Such shift inspired humanistic geographers like Tuan (1977), Relph (1976), and Buttimer (1993) to an enriched understanding of space that emphasised its emotional, cultural, and experiential dimensions. Advancing the concept of *place* (see also Cresswell, 2004), the humanistic approach underscored the significance of personal experience and the subjective interpretation of spaces, advocating for a geography that recognizes the

deep connections between people and their environments. Foregrounding people's lived experiences within the spaces they inhabit and interact with, humanistic geographies marked a significant departure from traditional and objectivist views of geography towards a more nuanced and complex appreciation of human-environment relations.

However, phenomenological approaches often face criticism for overlooking the influence of larger socio-spatial, cultural, and political structures on individual experiences (e.g. Ahmed, 2014; Bourdieu, 1977; Cresswell, 1996; Harvey, 1978; Massey, 2005). As argued by Simonsen & Koefoed (2020), this can foster an overly individualistic approach that neglects the broader context in which these experiences develop. Critical phenomenology particularly addresses these critiques by marrying a structuralist approach with an awareness of lived experiences. It recognizes the broader structural forces shaping individual experiences, thus providing a more holistic understanding of the relationship between the body and its environment (Kinkaid, 2021; Simonsen & Koefoed, 2020; Simonsen, 2005). It does so by introducing the concept of *embodiment*, emphasizing that our experiences are not just mental or cognitive but are deeply intertwined with our physical bodies and their interaction with the world around us (Simonsen & Koefoed, 2020). By scrutinizing embodied experiences, critical phenomenology offers a sensitive understanding of how social structures and power dynamics influence daily life (Salamon, 2018; Simonsen, 2013; Simonsen & Koefoed, 2020).

This framework is particularly useful for delving into the dynamics of lived experiences, further emphasising the significance of *embodied encounters* and how individuals relationally engage with their environment, and with one another. It implies an approach that scrutinizes these encounters and how they shape individuals' perceptions, interactions, and, ultimately, their experiences within space (see Chapter 4). To achieve this, critical phenomenology acknowledges that, while the body plays a central role, it may not be sufficient to address experiences tied to identity or power dynamics in a relational fashion (e.g. Creţan et al., 2022; Koefoed & Simonsen, 2022; Simonsen, 2013; Simonsen et al., 2017; Waldman & Ghertner, 2023). This approach also underscores the significance of subjectivity and difference, recognizing that individual experiences are influenced by factors such as race, gender, and class (Koefoed et al., 2017; Koefoed & Simonsen, 2022; Simonsen et al., 2017; Simonsen & Koefoed, 2020). This resonates with feminist geographical epistemologies (e.g. Massey, 1994; McDowell, 1992; Rose, 1993), and this alignment is particularly evident in the

shared focus on body, identity, and place (e.g. Longhurst, 2001; Moss & Dyck, 2003; Nast & Pile, 1998). Such intersection enriches my approach to understanding peri-urban life, emphasizing the value of diverse lived experiences. It underscores the necessity for an inclusive and holistic understanding of peri-urban spaces, where the embodied encounters and individual narratives of inhabitants are pivotal in shaping these spaces.

In sum, critical phenomenology offers a lens for approaching relationships between individuals, their environments, and the production of social phenomena shaping their experiences. This approach proves particularly valuable in my understanding of peri-urban life through its inhabitants' embodied encounters, providing a practical, bottom-up perspective on how they navigate and experience the production of their *lived* space, both individually and collectively. Moreover, such perspective allows to shed light on how these embodied encounters can become sites of struggle and challenge against these structures. By embracing these perspectives, critical phenomenology provides an entry for dissecting the lived experiences of individuals in the peri-urban context, enabling a deeper exploration of the complex interplay between spatial production, individual experience, and agency (see Chapter 4).

Entering the peri-urban through its matter

In my approach to *embody* peri-urban life and the lived realities of peri-urban inhabitants, I first draw from Simonsen's (2005) embodied reading of the production of space developed by Lefebvre, which originates from the following proposition:

> Before producing effects in the material realm (tool and objects), before producing itself by drawing nourishment from that realm, and before reproducing itself by generating other bodies, each living body is space and has its space: it produces itself in space and it also produces that space. (Lefebvre, 1974/1991, p.170)

According to Simonsen (2005), Lefebvre in this way not only suggests that the production of space influences daily experiences and lived realities, but also delves deeper into its effects on the body, emphasising its role as both producer and product of the space it inhabits. In other words, every living body is in itself a form of spatial production. This idea suggests that our body is a key agent in our experience of the production of space, in which the *lived* is inherently linked to our bodily experience. Simonsen (2005) here builds upon Lefebvre's (1974/1991)

assertion that space is a social product, produced by social relations and practices, therefore emphasising the significance of its embodiment. Laying the groundwork for a critical phenomenological approach to space, Simonsen (2005) argues that:

> Lefebvre's conception of space as a socially produced reality (…) allows for a fuller understanding of how bodies are integrated with and integrated in space (2005, p. 4).

She argues that this embodied approach to space supports an understanding of how we inhabit space, how we produce it, and how it produces us.

Simonsen's argument finds support by other accounts, such as Kinkaid's (2020) emphasis on the body as "the *key* site in the production of space" (2020, p.176, *original emphasis*). Specifically, Kinkaid (2020) maintains the body as operating an entry into the way we can know space and suggests that there is no way to think about space outside of our subjective experiences and relations, and that any attempt to do so would be fundamentally flawed. Kinkaid's (2020) argument reinforces the idea that space is not a neutral and objective backdrop to social relations but is instead produced through these relations and embodied experiences.

Simonsen & Koefoed (2020) further support this perspective, particularly within the urban context. They stress the inseparable connection between the body and urban space. To this end, they draw from Merleau-Ponty's (1945/2012) concept of *flesh*, to signify the intricate relationship between the body and the world. In the context of urbanity, what they define as the "flesh of the urban" encompasses lived experiences, cultural practices, and social relations, shaping and being shaped by the urban environment (Simonsen & Koefoed, 2020). This perspective, framed as a "geography of embodiment," underscores the importance of understanding individuals' embodied experiences in the production of urban space, and aligns with feminist and critical urban theories that challenge rigid urban definitions and binary epistemologies.

When I refer to the "matter" of peri-urban life in my thesis, I draw parallels with the *flesh* as conceptualized by these critical phenomenologists and their mutual emphasis on the embodied nature of spatial experience. Pointing to the tangible and lived realities of peri-urban life, the "matter" of spatial experiences of the peri-urban encompasses the physical, social, and economic conditions that define peri-urban environments, including the landscapes, infrastructures, and the daily practices of its inhabitants. It signifies the embodied materiality of peri-urban life,

highlighting how these spaces are produced and experienced through the bodily practices and social relations of those who inhabit them. Accordingly, my approach relies on these theoretical positions to enter the peri-urban life through its *embodiment*. This means approaching the peri-urban not just as an abstract concept but as a *lived*, experienced, and embodied reality that shapes the lives of its inhabitants. This critical phenomenological approach can help to unveil the complexities and nuances of peri-urban life, shedding light on power relations and inequalities embedded in the inhabitants' embodied experiences and further articulated in their encounters. By focusing on these embodied experiences and encounters, I seek to trace a path into the peri-urban life, how it is embodied and what struggles shape the lives of those who inhabit it. I will further elaborate such path in Chapter 4 through the concept of *encounter* (see Chapter 4).

Contesting and transforming peri-urban life: agency and everyday politics

Finally, approaching peri-urban life through a critical phenomenological lens enables us to address how peri-urban inhabitants can contest and transform their lived experiences within the space they inhabit. Indeed, critical phenomenology recognises individuals' agency to shape their own spatial realities through embodied experiences (Rezeanu, 2018; Simonsen & Koefoed, 2020).

As Simonsen and Koefoed (2020) note:

> The body's habitual, subjective experience of space can, under certain circumstances, be seen as a basis for the questioning of that space (2020, p. 79).

In other words, everyday experiences and bodily interactions with space can serve as a foundation for questioning and reshaping dominant modes of space production. This perspective echoes and extends the Lefebvrian perspective that these spaces as *lived* are not passively experienced but are active sites of contestation and transformation (Section 3.2).

Such challenge is carried out through what Simonsen & Koefoed (2020; see also Koefoed et al., 2021) term *everyday politics*, recognizing the inherent political nature of daily life where individuals, through their everyday experiences and practices, can exert influence on their social and spatial environments. Drawing on the works of Hannah Arendt (1958/1998, 1970), Michel Foucault (1988), and Lefebvre (1970, 1974), Simonsen & Koefoed (2020) enlarge their understanding of the "political" to the realm of the everyday, viewing it as not

solely "instrumental governance but the human capacity to act, engage and struggle together and thereby make new beginnings" (2020, p.111). This perspective situates everyday life as a platform for political agency, where the ordinary actions and interactions of individuals possess the potential to contest and reshape spatial hierarchies and power dynamics in urban settings. In this way, Simonsen & Koefoed (2020) offer a perspective on the political nature of urban space and the role of individuals in shaping it, emphasizing the transformative power of common activities like walking, using public transportation, or participating in festivals (see also Koefoed et al., 2017, 2021, 2022; Koefoed & Simonsen, 2011). Their perspective points to the importance of acknowledging and harnessing the political possibilities inherent in everyday practices for challenging and altering alienated lived experiences and established patterns of spatial production (Koefoed et al., 2017; Simonsen et al., 2017).

These possibilities are further discussed around the instance of solidarity, which becomes a pivotal concept in the framework of everyday politics as outlined by Koefoed (2023). Solidarity in this context is not just a feeling of unity based on shared interests or objectives, but a lived, active practice that manifests in the collective actions of individuals and communities. Solidarity, as explored by Koefoed (2023), is closely related to the concept of *everyday hospitality*. This form of hospitality extends beyond simple acceptance of others into one's physical space and towards a more profound embrace of difference and diversity as integral to the community fabric. Everyday hospitality can then become a vehicle for challenging the production of disfranchised experiences and can be instrumental in the creation of inclusive and meaningful meeting places. Such spaces provide opportunities for dialogue and the renegotiation of identities and senses of belonging.

By engaging with these notions of everyday politics and solidarity within my approach to peri-urban life, I propose that the nuances of everyday politics are laden with opportunities to transform social relations. Contestation and transformation of peri-urban experiences can then be approached as a fertile ground for the practice of everyday politics, where acts of solidarity transcend symbolic gesture, becoming significant for belonging and community resilience. This is particularly relevant when considering the plight expressed by Yellow Vests protesters contesting their spatial condition claimed to be made of marginalisation and lack of meaningful connections. It is in the small but significant acts of solidarity enacted through their occupation of roundabouts and building of cabins that the everyday politics of peri-urban life may be most vividly expressed and

experienced. Approaching their practices of solidarity can be then argued to become a means of enacting change and fostering a sense of belonging among peri-urban inhabitants experiencing a lack of meaningful relationships. In my approach, I will explore how these everyday acts of solidarity contribute to the shaping of peri-urban spaces as active sites of contestation and political engagement. The "matter" of peri-urban life, thus, is deeply entwined with these everyday practices. Through this exploration, I will suggest that everyday politics and practices of solidarity offer not only a critique of existing spatial and social processes of production, but also pave the way for alternative visions of peri-urban life that are more inclusive, equitable, and rooted in the lived experiences of their inhabitants.

In sum, these emphases on everyday politics, solidarity and individual agency enhances my approach to peri-urban life, and how it may be contested and transformed. It enables us to perceive these spaces not just as physical locations, but as dynamic realms where individuals' everyday experiences and actions are deeply influential. This perspective acknowledges that peri-urban inhabitants are not merely passive recipients of their environment; rather, they actively engage with, contest, and even transform the spatial realities they inhabit.

Such an approach illuminates the role of human agency in peri-urban settings, recognizing that the everyday experiences, struggles, and interactions of residents are pivotal in shaping the character and future of these spaces. It shifts the focus from a top-down view of spatial production to a more nuanced, bottom-up understanding that values the voices and experiences of peri-urban inhabitants. It further underscores the power of everyday politics, where routine actions and social practices of solidarity become vehicles for expressing dissatisfaction, claiming rights, and enacting change. By acknowledging and harnessing the transformative potential within these everyday experiences, this approach offers a lens to explore how peri-urban life is *lived*, as being experienced, contested, and transformed, ultimately contributing to the reshaping of peri-urban landscapes and the social fabric they encompass.

* * *

In this chapter, I have articulated the theoretical foundations of my approach to peri-urban life. Rooted in a critical phenomenological framework inspired by Lefebvre's insights into the social production of space, my approach emphasizes the significance of the lived experiences of peri-urban inhabitants. It probes into

their daily realities and the multifaceted ways they interact with, adapt to, and contest the spatial constructs conditioning their socio-spatial lived realities.

My approach more specifically rests on a critical phenomenological framework which bridges elements from Lefebvre's dialectical theory on the production of space to the existential and embodied nuances of phenomenology. This allows for an examination of both the physical and subjective dimensions of peri-urban life. It acknowledges the complexity of peri-urban areas where lived experiences may be subject to dominant structural processes, yet also identifies them as arenas of experiences ripe with the potential for grassroots empowerment and transformation. This approach is further enriched by the incorporation of embodied everyday politics and practices of solidarity, which emphasise the power of routine practices and interactions in shaping socio-spatial dynamics. By recognizing individuals' political agency in everyday activities, I illuminate how the seemingly trivial aspects of their daily life can cumulatively challenge and alter dominant production processes. This paves the way for subsequent discussions on the transformative potential of encounters within peri-urban spaces, laying the groundwork for a nuanced and dynamic understanding of these peripheries and what it means to live (in) them.

In the next chapter, I develop further how I conceptually operationalize this approach, focusing on the concept of *encounter*. Central to both Lefebvrian and critical phenomenological geographies, this concept will provide a lens to delve deeper into the fabric of peri-urban life. It allows for an understanding of how the peri-urban may be more concretely approached as *lived*, and specifically experienced, contested, and transformed, where the individuals' everyday interactions can become sites of struggle and catalysts for change and redefinition of their spatial realities.

4. A framework of encounter

> The urban, we might say, is the place of the drama resultant from the encounter and the site where we encounter the drama of the encounter itself.
>
> – Merrifield (2013, p.58-59)

If theory is the foundation of research, the use of concepts would be the building blocks that construct its edifice (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Concepts represent specific ideas or notions that serve as the vocabulary or language through which a theory is expressed and articulated. In Chapter 3, I laid the theoretical foundations for my approach to the peri-urban and its life, grounding it within a Lefebvrian-inspired critical phenomenological framework that emphasizes peri-urban dynamics as experienced, contested, and transformed. In this chapter, I further develop this framework by introducing the concept of *encounter* as a "building block" to make abstract concepts researchable, connecting the theoretical approach to the forthcoming empirical actualisation. I propose that encounters, as specific instances of interaction, provide a lens to analyse and approach practically the complex interplay of social dynamics, spatial practices, embodied experiences, and their politics within the peri-urban context.

In the following, I will first present my approach to peri-urban life through the conceptual prism of *encounter* (Section 4.1), and then detail how I approach its lived experiences (Section 4.2), contestation, and transformation (Section 4.3). By examining how encounters shape experiences and politics of peri-urban life, this conceptual framework seeks to capture the dynamic interplays between individual agency, socio-spatial challenges, and potentials for change within peri-urban settings.

4.1 Encounter

My choice to use the concept of *encounter* to approach peri-urban life has been guided by two considerations. Firstly, this choice is rooted in the empirical origins of my research. It all began with a pivotal encounter – an impactful moment that brought Yellow Vests protesters together, unifying them in their experience of a peri-urban condition as they protested their socio-spatial peripherality (see Chapter 1). This thesis is indeed born out of a "drama," as Merrifield (2012, 2013) would put it, where protesters encountered each other on roundabouts. In this vivid encounter, yesterday's strangers bonded both while protesting a certain life – a peri-urban life at the margin of "places that matter" – and in the creation of politics and daily experiences that would address their grievances. Embodying and contesting a common lived experience linked to their peri-urban spatiality, they sought to transform this experience, both in their day-to-day lives and on a broader political scale. In my perspective, the Yellow Vests' encounters on roundabouts are not merely anecdotal. They are critical to understanding the dynamics of peri-urban life and the capacity of its residents to challenge and transform their circumstances. This empirical case therefore acts as a crucial link between theoretical explorations and empirical observations, guiding the investigation into the experienced, contested, and transformative aspects of peri-urban life. This reflects the iterative character of my approach, which involved a reflexive process of continuous meaning-making between theory, empirics, and analysis (see Section 3.1). My use of encounter encapsulates this reflexive effort, marking a theoretical culmination of repeated cycles of review and synthesis, which involved revisiting and connecting emerging theoretical frames and analytical insights with empirics.

Secondly, my use of the concept of encounter further derives from the thesis' theoretical underpinnings of Lefebvrian critical urban theory and critical phenomenology. As noted in Section 3.2, the concept is central to the Lefebvrian critique of urban space, which highlights how standardisation and homogenisation, driven by urban development, erodes encounters and meaningful activities among inhabitants. I suggest that this critique resonates with the challenges faced by peri-urban communities, where individual experiences and their contingent struggles are profoundly influenced by broader urbanisation processes. Furthermore, the concept of encounter aligns with critical phenomenological geographies, which recognize that individual experiences are not isolated but are embedded within *embodied encounters* and broader structural contexts (Simonsen & Koefoed, 2020). Based on this theoretical position, this

concept empowers us to explore how peri-urban life unfolds in the real world. Mirroring Lefebvre's (1968/1974, 1974/1991) call for concepts to be grounded in concrete experiences and employed to drive social change, my use of the encounter serves as a dynamic and reflexive tool for analysis.

Spatialising encounters

It is helpful to start with the etymological origins of *encounter*. "Encounter" originates from the Latin *in contra*, meaning "in front of," "opposite to," or "against." It represents a moment of contact between different entities, where distinct realities, identities, and perspectives intersect. Encounters are not static events but dynamic processes involving relationships between individuals or groups. Because it denotes a moment of contact, the encounter constitutes a platform for dialogue and negotiation, where differences can be either contested or acknowledged and respected (Valentine, 2008, 2013; Valentine & Sadgrove, 2012). While such moments may be fleeting or extended in time, the encounter constitutes an active process that, in Wilson's (2016) words, "makes difference" as it "forms, remake and give meaning through the interaction it involves" (2016, p.255).

Crucially, encounters involve a creative process where new things emerge. This creativity is shaped by the perceptions, emotions, and actions of those involved (Simonsen & Koefoed, 2020; Wilson, 2016, 2017; Wilson & Darling, 2016). In this way, encounters don't leave things unchanged; it involves transformation and evolution (Merrifield, 2012, 2013; Simonsen & Koefoed, 2020). These interactions require individuals to negotiate their differences and diverse ways of seeing and being, potentially challenging preconceived notions and generating new meanings and understandings (Wilson, 2016). This performative and creative nature of encounters underscores their transformative potential. Encounters, in other words, are not merely moments of contact but invoke a dynamic process capable of shaping individual and collective experiences, relationships, viewpoints, and identities. Furthermore, by creating something new, encounters have the potential to challenge established power structures and foster opportunities for social and political change (Merrifield, 2013; Simonsen et al., 2017).

This transformative conception of encounter has inspired a vibrant field within human geography, often referred to as "geographies of encounter." This stream of research critically examines how individuals navigate and negotiate differences in their daily lives within urban environments (e.g. Koefoed et al., 2017; Matejskova

& Leitner, 2011; Merrifield, 2013; Simonsen & Koefoed, 2020; Valentine, 2008, 2013; Wilson & Darling, 2016). Some scholars in this field specifically draw upon Lefebvre's (1996, p.111) suggestion that the urban is the "field of encounters" (e.g. Wilson & Darling, 2016; Merrifield, 2013; Simonsen & Koefoed, 2020). This is echoed, for example, by Wilson & Darling's (2016) assertion that:

> Encounters are centrally about the maintenance, production of difference [and] fundamentally frame urban experiences and subjectivities (2016, p.2).

This scholarship emphasises encounters as politically charged moments deeply rooted in the urban context, echoing Lefebvre's (1970/2003, 1968/1974) view of the urban as a site of production and struggle (see Simonsen & Koefoed, 2020; Merrifield, 2013).

The encounter: a lens to approach the peri-urban "lived"

Based on these considerations, I employ the concept of *encounter* as a dynamic, creative, and politically significant process. It is envisioned as a moment where individuals or groups converge, each bearing unique realities, identities, and viewpoints, interact and create new ideas, beliefs, values, relationships, and identities. It also serves as platform for challenging established power structures. Building upon this foundation, I use the concept of encounter as a lens to examine the dynamics of peri-urban life, highlighting how such interactions among those living it can foster performativity, allowing them to embody, and actively seek to contest and overcome peri-urban lived realities. My conceptual framework, which draws from my Lefebvrian-inspired critical phenomenological perspective and incorporates the concept of encounter, operationalises my approach to peri-urban life as *lived* (Section 3.1) as a dynamic, evolving process that is significantly shaped by encounters.

Within this framework, peri-urban life as *lived* is characterised by its three evolving qualities: as experienced, contested and transformed. I advance these qualities as both shaped by and shaping encounters: where encounters shape the lived experiences of peri-urban life, and simultaneously, the nature and outcomes of these encounters reciprocally influence and transform how peri-urban life may be experienced once contested. This "triadic" perspective is grounded both in my empirical engagements with the Yellow Vests, as well as by the overall theoretical approach established in Chapter 3, outlining peri-urban life as a *lived* entity, ever-changing and concurrently moulded by its inhabitants and their experiences.

Viewed through the lens of encounters, these three qualities of peri-urban life represent a series of experienced realities that, while characterized by everyday struggles, are also the driving force behind the continuous evolution and reshaping of peri-urban experiences. The contestation of these struggles, as voiced by the Yellow Vests, are not mere expressions of dissatisfaction but catalysts for change – a change that manifests through their encounters and newly found collective agency. Here, the peri-urban emerges not just as a backdrop to life but as a stage where life's particularities are performed – where encounters play the role of a stage where the grievances and aspirations of the Yellow Vests find expression and impetus for societal and spatial shifts.

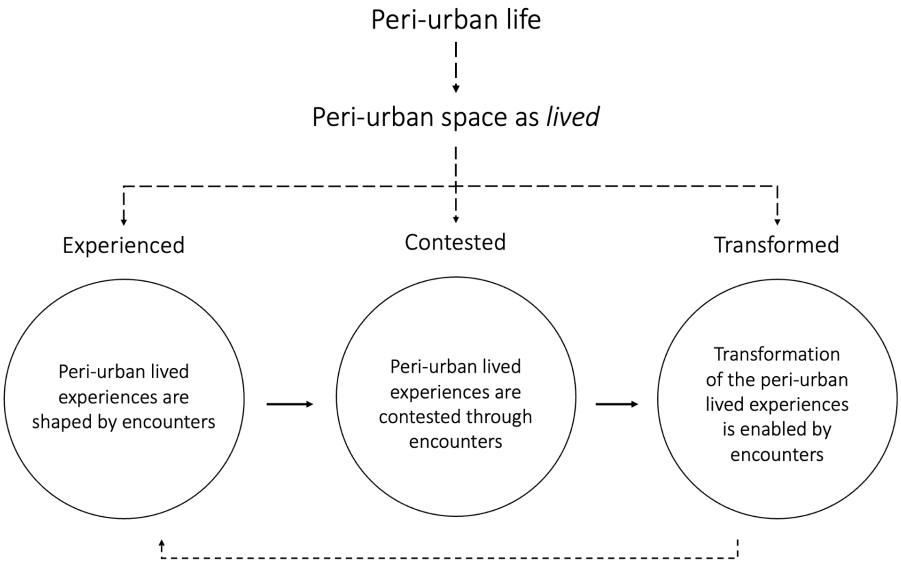


Figure 4.1
A pathway to understand peri-urban life as experienced, contested and transformed through encounters. Source: author.

Specifically, my use of encounter can be summarised as follows (Figure 4.1). Firstly, I use the concept of encounter to explore the nature of peri-urban lived experiences. This addresses how individual and collective experiences shape and are shaped by the socio-spatial environment and encounters. In other words, I use

encounters as the entry point to the experiential fabric of peri-urban life, and how these encounters – or potentially their lack of – may shape community life and individual identity within peri-urban areas (see Section 4.2).

Secondly, I harness the notion of encounters to delve into the ways in which peri-urban lived experiences are contested. I examine the moments of friction and contestation where Yellow Vests protesters challenge the existing spatial and social orders of their peri-urban lived experiences. These encounters become moments where power dynamics are confronted and where the grievances and aspirations of the protesters surface, offering a deeper understanding of the socio-spatial conflicts and contestations inherent in peri-urban areas (see Section 4.3).

Finally, the concept of encounter is pivotal in my understanding of the transformative potential within the experienced peri-urban. It accentuates how these interactions can serve as catalysts for change, highlighting the agency of inhabitants in redefining and reshaping their lived environments. Through encounters, peri-urban life shifts from a space of struggle to a dynamic arena where new forms of social relations, spatial arrangements, and modes of living are constantly being imagined and enacted. In this way, the concept of encounter provides a dynamic lens through which the lived, contested, and transformative dimensions of peri-urban life can be understood and analysed (see Section 4.3).

In the following sections, I will elaborate on these three dimensions. In Section 4.2, I discuss how the concept of encounter can be used to enter the fabric of peri-urban life and unveil the daily lived realities and challenges of those who live it. Section 4.3 shifts the focus to the agency of those living the peri-urban and their potential to contest and reshape their experiences through encounters. Here, I discuss how encounters can serve as a platform for contestation and transformation of peri-urban life. I use my case of the French Yellow Vests to illustrate this dynamic. Through this exploration, my aim is to shed light on the potential for change and transformation within the peri-urban lived, and how active encounters can help to create a new understanding of this often-neglected peri-urban experience and socio-spatial condition.

4.2 Peri-urban life as *experienced* through encounters

In this section, I focus on the first dimension of my conceptual framework built around the concept of encounter: peri-urban experience. To investigate how the

peri-urban is experienced by its inhabitants, and how, in turn, it may be contested and transformed by the Yellow Vests' encounter, I must first examine what roots such encounter. My attention is here directed towards the concept of encounter itself, substantiating the central premise of this thesis and laying the groundwork for the forthcoming empirical analysis. At this stage, the focus is on clarifying how encounters *per se,* may contribute to enter the experiential fabric of the peri-urban – how, as the possibility for interactions between individuals, they may shape the lived experiences of peri-urban inhabitants navigating the peri-urban socio-spatial environment.

Urban sprawl and the paradox of encounters: cohesion and separation

To inquire the experiential nature of peri-urban life, my position firstly builds on Merrifield's (2012) emphasis on encounters in shaping the urban condition, recognizing their dual nature as both unifying and separating. The encounter, accordingly, not only defines the essence of the urban but also functions as the battleground where the inherent struggles of the urban condition come to the fore. Merrifield (2012, see also 2013) supports this perspective by articulating that:

> The urban becomes the site as well as the nemesis of the encounter, its positive, unifying capacity, as well as its negative charge, its demonic power of separation and dissociation, of alienation, of lonely rather than loaded crowds (2012, p.272).

In Merrifield's perspective, the encounter serves as a catalyst for the contradictions within the urban space, consolidating social relations while breaking down barriers of distance. Drawing on Lefebvre (1970/2003), Merrifield (2012) highlights the urban essence residing in the encounter. The encounter is argued to define the urban as a space that "consolidates" social relations (as termed by Lefebvre 1970/2003, p.174; Merrifield, 2013, p.37), breaking down the barriers of distance and giving rise to a distinct form of sociability. Bringing together various elements, such as capital, goods, people, information, and conflicting activities, this process results in both concentration and differentiation occurring simultaneously within the urban fabric. This echoes Lefebvre's (1970/2003) assertion that the urban, in its purest form, is "a place of encounter, assembly, simultaneity" (1970/2003, p.118), emphasising its potential as a space of possibility, where people can convene to negotiate, challenge, and transform their differences, as well as the power dynamics that shape them.

Both Merrifield (2012; 2013) and Lefebvre (1970/2003) acknowledge the distortion of this urban essence by negative influences, particularly the impact of capitalism on urbanisation. The urban environment, while fostering convergence, also introduces constraints, leading to homogenization, separation, and segregation of individuals. It can produce feelings of isolation and solitude among individuals, giving rise to what Merrifield poetically labels "lonely crowds" (2013, p.58). Urbanisation often leads to a sense of separation and alienation among people, resulting in a lack of meaningful connections. The physical barriers introduced by urbanisation, such as highways, railways, and other infrastructure, can further isolate and restrict encounters between people from different parts of the city, including its peripheries (see also Lefebvre, 1968/1974). Essentially, urbanisation both enables and hinders encounters.

Merrifield (2012; 2013) further relies on Lefebvre's (1968/1974; 1970/2003) historical analysis which elucidates this paradox, emphasizing the shift from use value to exchange value in urban spaces. Traditional villages and pre-industrial cities thrived as places fostering social interactions, characterized by streets, sidewalks, public spaces, markets, festivals, and protests contributing to a rich tapestry of encounters. However, with the rise of urbanisation, profit-driven motives led to the commodification of urban spaces, impacting social relations, and perpetuating social and economic inequality. The dominance of exchange value, influenced by profit motives henceforth diminished the use value of urban spaces and the opportunity for meaningful encounters, giving way to spaces of consumption, stifling creativity and innovation (Lefebvre, 1970; 1968/1974, p.135).

It is important to note that this shift, as argued by Lefebvre (1968/1974) and then Merrifield (2012; 2013), has far-reaching consequences, affecting spatial, infrastructural, and, importantly, social dimensions. It significantly impacts social relations, and the way people interact within the urban fabric. The working classes bear the brunt of this change, experiencing space homogenization, fragmentation, and the erosion of use value – a condition poignantly labelled the "misery of habitation" (Lefebvre, 1968/1974, p.146). This condition subjects urban inhabitants to a regimented daily life dictated by dominant urbanisation processes that have become "de-urbanizing" and bereft of spontaneity (Lefebvre 1968/1974, p.27). As they are pushed out of city centres and disconnected from the traditional social networks and cultural practices that once defined urban life, the working classes often find themselves isolated and estranged. The loss of community and belonging breeds feelings of disempowerment and social

exclusion, perpetuating cycles of social and economic inequality. This overall critique of urban sprawl underscores the vital role of encounters in fostering vibrant, socially cohesive urban spaces, while simultaneously highlighting how their absence contributes to alienation and disconnection among urban inhabitants. The lack of these encounters in sprawling urban landscapes not only diminishes the richness of social interactions but also exacerbates feelings of isolation, as individuals become physically and emotionally distanced from one another, eroding the sense of community and shared experience that defines urban life.

The peri-urban experience: a life of no encounters?

Drawing from Merrifield's Lefebvrian-inspired perspective on encounters in the urban context, I expand these arguments onto the peri-urban context. As a product of urban sprawl, the peri-urban landscape may produce similar effects as those by Lefebvre (1968/1974; 1970/2003) and Merrifield (2012) for the urban, diminishing the possibility for social interactions and exacerbating feelings of isolation. Indeed, the peri-urban landscape often exhibits sprawling housing developments, commercial centres, and profit-driven ventures that could prioritize exchange value over use value, favouring financial gain over the public good (see Chapters 2 & 8). Consequently, such configuration could be argued to result in a scarcity of public spaces and limited opportunities for social interactions and cultural exchanges, exacerbating the isolation and disconnection experienced by its inhabitants. Drawing on these insights, my approach inquires if living in peri-urban areas might be characterised by such experiences of alienation, solitude, and a lack of community. Such experiences may particularly affect working-class demographics that predominate in these areas and exacerbate the pre-existing social and spatial inequalities inherent in peri-urban spaces.

I therefore propose the encounter as a crucial lens through which to understand the dynamics shaping peri-urban life and how it may be experienced. This perspective allows an exploration of how the produced lack of social interactions and community connections in peri-urban areas may influence the everyday experiences of its inhabitants. In these spaces, inhabitants may face a distinctive set of experiential and social challenges. Such challenges are deeply embedded in the fabric of peri-urban living, reflecting broader issues of spatial and social disconnection. By focusing on encounters, and potentially their erasure within the peri-urban fabric, we gain insight into how peri-urban residents navigate their environment, form social bonds, and perceive their place in the wider community.

This approach also highlights the contrast between the potential for vibrant community life and the reality of isolation and disconnection that is prevalent in peri-urban settings. Understanding the role of encounters within the peri-urban fabric and how it may be experienced sheds light on the underlying causes of social fragmentation and offers a pathway to address the complexities of living at the periphery of urban areas.

To conclude, the encounter firstly functions as a platform to inquire the experiential fabric of the peri-urban as *lived*, and where its dynamics are vividly manifested and experienced. I propose it is within the issue of encounters and their possibility offered (or not) within the peri-urban landscape that the struggling realities of the peri-urban experience may become palpable. As I will argue in the next section, it is also where these realities may be further subjected to contestation and potential transformation.

4.3 Peri-urban life as *contested* and *transformed*: the transformative politics of encounter

Building upon the Lefebvrian notion of the urban as both a process of production and a site of struggle (Section 3.2), I suggest that marginalized groups can appropriate urban spaces for resistance against prevailing power structures. Through collective actions and the creation of alternative spaces, marginalized groups can challenge the dominant spatial production and establish environments that reflect their values and interests (e.g. Harvey, 2008, 2013; Marcuse, 2009; Mitchell, 2003; Soja, 2010). To counteract the dominance of space production and the erasure of encounters, Lefebvre (1970) calls for a "revolution" to occur within the encounter itself. This section will in this vein explore how encounters may further serve as platform for contesting and transforming peri-urban life.

Having recognised the encounter as a critical element of peri-urban lived experience, I posit the Yellow Vests' own encounter represents a response to their experienced conditions. Their encounter, as an act of contestation, emerges as a challenge to the prevailing spatial production processes that have undermined the practicality and utility of peri-urban life, reshaping the fabric of their experiences. Accordingly, I see the Yellow Vests' protests as a form of politics that confronts and challenges the disenfranchisement wrought by spatial configurations of the peri-urban. Their collective action does more than just voice discontent; it forges

a new type of encounter, one that has the potential to catalyse change. By occupying roundabouts, the Yellow Vests demonstrate a collective reimagining and repurposing of peri-urban life. Thus, I suggest their protests to manifest a *politics of encounter*, as defined by Merrifield (2013), asserting a space for community and agency in an environment that has typically stifled such engagement. In creating this new encounter, they not only contest the prevailing state of affairs but also open up possibilities for transforming their peri-urban lived realities.

Politics of encounter

To develop this perspective, I first draw on Merrifield's (2012, 2013) concept of *politics of encounter* to grasp the significance of encounters as crucial junctures of contestation. These moments act as a counterforce to the production of the peri-urban lived experience and its resulting struggles. This notion helps to shed light on how communities assert their politics of encounter, particularly in environments where such encounters are lacking.

The concept of politics of encounter builds upon Lefebvre's (1968/1974) *right to the city*, which emphasizes the importance of creating spaces for encounters and fostering community building as a means of asserting this fundamental right. This right, according to Lefebvre (1968/1974), entails access to:

> Urban life, renewed centrality, places for encounters and exchanges, rhythms of life and schedules that allow for the full and complete use of these moments and places (Lefebvre, 1968/1974, p.146).

The right to the city is not just a right to access and use urban resources, but also a right to participate in the creation and transformation of urban space through encounters with others. The absence of use value, claims Lefebvre (1968/1974), deprives the urban of its "centrality" by no longer providing meaningful centres for human activity and interaction (Section 4.2), and its restoration must involve political action. Merrifield (2011; 2012; 2013) evaluates Lefebvre's notion of the right to the city as too "restrictive and unfulfilling" (2011, p.478; see also Marcuse, 2011). Instead, he advocates for a broader interpretation that involves the politics of encounter, highlighting how encounters are fundamental to creating meaning and forging relationships within urban space. While Lefebvre's right to the city focuses on the right of urban dwellers to participate in decision-making and urban planning, Merrifield (2013) extends the Lefebvrian notion of

"centrality" by emphasizing the importance of social interaction and community building in the struggle for urban space:

> The notion of encounter is a tale of how people come together as human beings, of why collectivities are formed and how solidarity takes hold and takes shape, and also how intersectional politics shapes up urbanely (2013, p.33).

Merrifield (2013) argues the politics of encounter is not just about creating physical spaces for interaction but also about creating social spaces where people can share their experiences and form connections. Creating spaces for encounter emerging out of these politics can be a catalyst for transformation and creation of centrality, challenging prevailing power structures and holds potentials for social change.

Furthermore, Merrifield (2012; 2013) asserts, the politics of encounter is realised through embodied acts of occupation, a position also assumed by critical phenomenological geographies (see Simonsen & Koefoed, 2020). Occupations fundamentally serve as spaces of encounter, where individuals from diverse backgrounds converge and engage with one another. The very act of occupying a space constitutes a political statement challenging prevailing power structures. It provides marginalized communities with a means to assert their presence and advocate for their right to the city. Occupations also foster a deep sense of community, facilitating the exchange of ideas, narratives, and experiences, which are essential for fostering solidarity and collective action towards social change. Merrifield (2013) provides examples of occupations, like Occupy Wall Street, the Zapatista movement in Mexico, and the occupation of Tahrir Square in Egypt, and discusses how these occupations can be seen as alternatives to traditional public spaces. In areas where traditional public spaces are either inaccessible or non-existent, occupations can serve as spaces for encounter and community building (see also Robbers, 2020). Overall, Merrifield (2013) argues occupations enable marginalized groups to assert their presence and articulate their politics of encounter.

In the context of the Yellow Vests' occupation of roundabouts in peri-urban areas, this concept helps us interpret their actions as an assertion of their politics of encounter. Their occupation represents an attempt to establish spaces for encounter and community-building in an environment where such spaces were conspicuously lacking. It may indeed signify a direct form of politics aimed at contesting the dominant power structures that isolate and disconnect them. By occupying roundabouts, the Yellow Vests demonstrate the necessity for spaces of

encounter in peri-urban areas while simultaneously creating politics of encounter and opportunities for interaction and community-building.

Contesting peri-urban life: from politics to spaces of encounter

Merrifield's (2012; 2013) *politics of encounter* sheds light on how encounters act as arenas for contestation, challenging power structures and enabling social transformation. This perspective offers further insights into the Yellow Vests' occupations of roundabouts and how these encounters embody transformative potential. Such encounters can become moments of rupture, giving rise to new subjectivities, agency, and extending beyond immediate temporal and spatial boundaries, serving as spaces where human bonding and solidarity thrive (see Chapter 7).

While peri-urban realities may often appear rigid and resistant to change, the protesters' encounters can break these boundaries, opening new vistas for peri-urban life and reshaping the production of peri-urban space. Within this transformative journey, the moment of their encounter is approached as one where transformation takes root, birthing fresh forms of social and political organization, embodied experiences, and subjectivities. Their gatherings on roundabouts, coupled with the construction of cabins, metamorphose into what Merrifield (2013) terms *spaces of encounter*; that is, "spaces in which social absence and social presence attain a visible structuration and political coherence" (2013, p.66). These spaces offer an opportunity for protesters to coalesce and collectively envision new possibilities for peri-urban spaces and politics. As Merrifield (2013) points out, spaces of encounters provide individuals with agency, enabling them to resist and imagine new possibilities within imposed structures shaping everyday life. He exemplifies this transformative potential through the Occupy Wall Street movement, where protesters formed new subjectivities to confront entrenched power structures. Similarly, the 2011 Indignados movement in Spain gave rise to collective identities and agency, challenging prevailing power hierarchies and nurturing a sense of shared citizenship (Islar & Irgil, 2018).

Accordingly, I approach the Yellow Vests' occupation of roundabouts as involving a similar transformative force. Through their encounters, they protest a form of disfranchisement inherent to their peri-urban lives while simultaneously creating new spaces for communal interaction and bonding, spaces which did not previously exist. By turning roundabouts into spaces of encounter, the protesters forge a shared struggle for peri-urban politics of encounter. This leads to the crystallization of a collective identity and the cultivation of a sense of community,

citizenship, and belonging. In Lefebvre's terminology, this encounter "consolidates" where the peri-urban space "separates," effectively filling the void that inhabitants were deprived of within the production of the peri-urban.

Finally, Merrifield's (2013) inquiry into the lasting impacts of encounters within an enduring political evolution deeply resonates with my case. While the Yellow Vests' actions are momentary, their transformative potential could endure, echoing the idea that encounters can transcend their own temporal and spatial limits. According to Merrifield (2011, 2013), the persistence of the politics of encounter through embodied collective actions can indeed lead to the crystallization of a collective identity, the emergence of alternative spaces for encounter, and the cultivation of a sense of community and citizenship. Yellow Vests protesters can be approached accordingly as a:

> force that creates its own historical space. For in any politics of encounter, it's not in space that people act: people become space by acting (Merrfield, 2011, p.480).

The roundabouts they occupy are transformed into spaces of encounter, redefining their peri-urban spatiality. This transformation is defined by an emotional and material topography where human connections and solidarities flourish. In essence, Merrifield's argument may be applied to the Yellow Vests' actions, where I suggest their embodied peri-urban *politics of encounter* will endure beyond their occupation of peri-urban roundabouts, and reflect his conclusion:

> To that degree, the politics of encounter will always be an encounter somewhere (Merrifield, 2011, p.480).

Scale(s) of encounters

The enduring impact of the politics of encounter and its embodiment can be further related to critical phenomenological geographies of encounter (Simonsen et al., 2017; Simonsen & Koefoed, 2020), particularly their analysis of events such as festivals that provide spaces of encounters challenging dominant power structures and fostering opportunities for collective action (Simonsen et al., 2017). Specifically, Simonsen et al. (2017) offer an exploration of the Kulturhavn festival in Copenhagen, demonstrating its role as a series of embodied encounters. By creating spaces of encounter, festivals like Kulturhavn enable the reconfiguration of urban spaces. Through shared emotional and material experiences, these festivals cultivate a profound sense of community among

participants and establish temporary autonomous zones where alternative forms of social organization can emerge. This perspective aligns with the notion that encounters transcend their immediate temporal and spatial confines, persisting through the agency and identity they confer upon participants.

Such account provides a deeper understanding of how encounters can serve as a catalyst for political change, aligning with the Simonsen & Koefoed's (2020) notion of *everyday politics* and their idea that politics extends beyond formal institutions into daily life practices (see Section 3.3). Encounters, in this sense, represent a form of politics of encounter that involves within the scale of everyday life the negotiation of power and identity during interactions with others. Simonsen et al. (2017) contend that encounters can foster a sense of community, challenge prevailing urban narratives, and reconfigure urban spaces through shared emotional and material experiences.

Leitner's (2012) own exploration of "spaces of encounters" in small-town America illustrates how encounters between diverse social groups can profoundly influence the politics of belonging in a specific locale. Leitner demonstrates that encounters can be transformative and long-lasting, shaping how individuals perceive themselves and others, consequently moulding the politics of belonging within a given space. In line with Merrifield's (2013) argument, Leitner highlights the embodied nature of encounters, emphasizing that they encompass not only temporal and spatial dimensions but also physical and emotional ones. Their transformative potency lies in the interconnectedness between people and their actions.

Building upon these perspectives, we can further investigate the enduring and transformative potential of encounters applicable within the context of the Yellow Vests protesters but also in various other contexts. The assembly of individuals in spaces, like roundabouts and cabins, provides unique opportunities for people to come together, envision new possibilities for spaces, experiences, and politics. As individuals connect, they might appropriate or establish their own spaces, with their physical bodies taking centre stage in shaping both the spatial landscape and its emotional and material contours (see also Rioux et al., 2017). This emerging politics will be addressed in this thesis through the empirical case of the Cabin constructed by protesters and subsequently relocated away from the roundabout (see Chapter 9). The encounter on roundabouts may persist over time and space as individuals continue these relations, birthing other spaces for their bodies to unite and perpetuate the transformative work initiated during the initial encounter.

However, it is essential to acknowledge that while encounters can promote community and cooperation, their durability is not guaranteed. The long-term transformative impact of encounters is still a subject of ongoing analysis. Encounters can sometimes take on confrontational forms and may inadvertently reinforce power imbalances and perpetuate differences, stereotypes and prejudices (see Simonsen et al., 2017; Simonsen & Koefoed, 2020; Valentine, 2013; Valentine & Sadgrove, 2012). Furthermore, there is the risk of encounters oversimplifying and romanticising the complexity of social difference and diversity (Valentine, 2013; Valentine & Sadgrove, 2012). While physical presence is a necessary condition for encounters, meaningful dialogue, and relationship-building are equally crucial. Encounters that lack depth and genuine interaction may fall short of achieving their transformative potential.

In light of these complexities, it is crucial to recognize the limitations of encounters as well as their potential. As I will address later in Chapter 9. encounters can be powerful catalysts for change, but their effectiveness is contingent upon the quality of interactions and the broader social and political context in which they occur. This nuanced understanding is essential for leveraging encounters towards more enduring and meaningful social transformation, mindful of the intricacies and challenges inherent in bridging social divides. While encounters can act as catalysts for change and community building, they should be seen as part of a broader process that includes sustained relationships, dialogue, and efforts to address structural factors contributing to the issues being contested, whether in urban or peri-urban life.

* * *

In this chapter, I have developed the conceptual framework I use to approach and analyse peri-urban life through the lens of encounters. Building upon the theoretical foundations laid in Chapter 3 and paving the way for empirical exploration in the chapters that follow, I have articulated an understanding of peri-urban life through three interrelated dimensions: as experienced, contested, and transformed. The encounter, conceptualized as a moment of interaction, emerges as an analytical tool that bridges the abstract with the concrete, allowing us to delve into the complex interplay between lived experiences, social dynamics, spatial practices, and politics characteristic of peri-urban environments. This framework positions encounters as significant moments in the production of peri-urban life, offering a prism through which we can examine how peri-urban inhabitants experience, challenge, and reshape it.

Firstly, this framework uses the notion of encounters to analyse the lived experiences of peri-urban life, specifically how encounters shape daily realities amidst the socio-spatial and economic processes of urbanisation. Secondly, the contested nature of these experiences is illuminated by encounters being understood as arenas for negotiation, resistance, and the articulation of alternative politics of encounter embodied by Yellow Vests protesters and their actions. Lastly, the framework considers how these encounters can spark changes, fostering new possibilities for new spaces, experiences, and politics. Along these lines, this chapter has further underscored the empirical significance of the case of the Yellow Vests protesters as a vivid illustration of how encounters can serve as catalysts for qualifying, understanding and transforming peri-urban life.

In conclusion, the framework of encounter outlined in this chapter provides a roadmap that will guide the forthcoming empirical investigation, offering a lens through which to explore dimensions of peri-urban life as *lived*. It emphasizes the importance of encounters in shaping the dynamics of peri-urban life, highlighting the potential for social and spatial transformation in these interactions. In the next chapter, I will address the methodology employed to empirically investigate and analyse such process.

5. A methodology for peri-urban life

As I transition from the realm of abstract theory and concepts to concrete empirical exploration of peri-urban life, this chapter introduces the methodology underpinning my research. It delineates the strategies employed to investigate the multifaceted nature of the peri-urban as *lived*. This methodology involves qualitative research in the form of ethnographic research to enter the layers of daily life, interact with participants, and immerse myself in their experiences. Through participant observation and immersive fieldwork, the aim is to capture the voices and lived experiences of those inhabiting the peri-urban and their struggles. The chapter outlines the blueprint through which this thesis uncovers and qualifies peri-urban inhabitants' experiences and delves into how they actively engage as Yellow Vests in contesting and transforming these experiences. I will here discuss the methodological choices and specific methods used to access the peri-urban world, engage with the participants, collect, and analyse the data to illuminate the intricate tapestry of peri-urban life. Additionally, I will address the implications of my subjectivity as a researcher, as well as the ethical considerations inherent in this kind of research.

5.1 Peri-urban life: an ethnographic approach

At the outset, my empirical engagement with the Yellow Vests movement significantly influenced the development of my theoretical and methodological frameworks, serving as a mediating force throughout the thesis. Such engagement underlines my adoption of a qualitative research design (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Patton, 2015), which facilitated a nuanced examination of the varied processes, experiences, narratives, and meanings shaping peri-urban life. As I mentioned in Section 3.1, my research journey began without a fixed theoretical or methodological blueprint. Instead, it evolved organically, becoming

closely entwined with the dynamics encountered during my fieldwork among Yellow Vests. This approach reflects a deliberate and reflective intertwining of research aims, theoretical insights, and empirical realities, highlighting the adaptability of my methodological framework to the lived complexities of peri-urban life. Engaging with Yellow Vests participants and delving into the peri-urban peripheries (Section 5.2) yielded data that was often raw, unstructured, and at times contradictory, necessitating meticulous sorting, interpretation, and analysis (Section 5.3). This complexity in empirical data mirrors the unpredictable nature of fieldwork, demanding ongoing adjustments to align with the realities encountered. Such experiences are not unique but rather characteristic of qualitative research (Blommaert & Jie, 2010; Brigden & Hallett, 2021; Snow et al., 2003), where initial theoretical and methodological frameworks often evolve to more accurately reflect and accommodate the nuances of the studied phenomena. My exploration of peri-urban life and its multifaceted realities was not a straightforward process, but it was a rich source of knowledge that deeply influenced the formulation of my methodology and the subsequent analysis of peri-urban life presented in this thesis.

Ethnographic and multi-sited approach

Aligned with its Lefebvrian-inspired critical phenomenological framework, this thesis embraces a research methodology that entails immersing the researcher into participants' daily life to gain insights into their subjective experiences and socio-spatial struggles, placing a premium on qualitative data and phenomenological insights (e.g. Koefoed et al., 2021; Koefoed & Simonsen, 2022; Simonsen, 2022; Simonsen et al., 2017).

In light of this, ethnography emerged as a highly relevant methodology for my research due to its capacity to uncover intricate dynamics of the social and spatial dimensions of human existence. Recent shifts in and beyond human geography have underscored the value of such approaches in understanding the lived realities of individuals affected by complex societal transformations (e.g. Bizeul, 2007; Huerta, 2010; Koefoed et al., 2021, 2022; Koster, 2020; Low, 2017; Pardo & Prato, 2018; Simonsen, 2022; Simonsen et al., 2017). Ethnography essentially implies research "from the inside," offering a lens through which one scrutinizes the "tissue of everyday life" (Herbert, 2000, p.551). It enables insight into the processes and meanings that underlie social action, thereby exposing mechanisms through which societal norms are perpetuated or sometimes challenged (see Huerta, 2010; Low, 2017; Pardo & Prato, 2018). This approach goes beyond

traditional policy analyses and qualitative interviews by involving participant observation, offering narratives and context-specific insights that emphasize the experienced and embodied dimensions of these processes (Abraham, 2018; Arnold, 2018; Graezer Bideau, 2018; Koefoed & Simonsen, 2011; Koster, 2020).

My choice of an ethnographic approach is firstly grounded in its immersive nature, which enabled an intimate understanding of experiences of participants, transcending the limitations of a purely observational stance (Bizeul, 2007). This direct engagement allowed for the capture of nuanced details, shedding light on the multifaceted dimensions of how the peri-urban may be experienced. Furthermore, the emphasis on participant observation in ethnographic research allows to record encounters as they unfold, providing valuable insights into the dynamic socio-spatial processes at play (Bizeul, 2007). This methodological approach proved well-suited to uncover the agency of participants, shedding light on how they may navigate, contest, and transform their experiences of the space they were living in. The commitment of ethnographic methods to understanding the subjective experiences and perspectives of individuals further aligns with the overarching goal of my thesis. By engaging in conversations and daily interactions with participants, this approach has enabled the documentation of their experiences, narratives, interpretations, and meanings attributed to the space they lived in. This made it possible to capture the lived realities of those living the peri-urban daily. Additionally, ethnography's adaptability to evolving situations and contexts ensures an up-to-date perspective that accommodates the dynamic nature of the phenomena under study.

To navigate the complex and dynamic fabric of the peri-urban experience, I specifically adopted a multi-sited ethnographic approach (Falzon, 2016; Marcus, 1995; Van Duijn, 2020). This methodology facilitated an in-depth examination of the diverse and layered aspects of peri-urban life while spanning various locations and groups of participants. My research accordingly encompassed diverse sites including residential areas, public and private spaces, malls, and transportation hubs. This approach also facilitated the exploration of peri-urban mobility, allowing me to understand how daily encounters are influenced by movement and accessibility characteristic to the peri-urban environment (see Hannam et al., 2006; Sheller & Urry, 2006). This multi-sited ethnographic approach also offered the opportunity to engage with a diverse array of participants, reflecting the wide socio-economic spectrum within the Yellow Vests movement (see Section 1.1). This diversity in interactions not only enriched my understanding of the peri-urban experience across different sites but also enabled

me to identify this common experiential thread that anchors my research among the varied profiles of the Yellow Vests. Despite their differences, a shared experience emerged, characterized by distinct challenges and dynamics of mobility, accessibility, and daily life, underscoring the complex interplay between the diversity of socio-economic backgrounds and locations with spatial realities in the peri-urban context. In this way, the multi-sited ethnographic approach responded to the complexities and fluidity invoked by peri-urban life as the object of my study, allowing for a nuanced exploration of encounters' role in shaping peri-urban experiences and mobilities across diverse sites, contexts, and timeframes.

5.2 Fieldwork and data collection

The Yellow Vests as entry point

In 2018, the Yellow Vests made their presence known on roundabouts, symbolizing their protest against a life confined to the shadow of metropolises in peri-urban fringes (see Section 1.1). I used these protests as my entry point into the peri-urban lived experiences. By closely engaging with Yellow Vest participants, I gained valuable empirical insights into how individuals may navigate daily life in peri-urban areas and interact with their surroundings. The Yellow Vests' mobilization also highlighted the role of collective agency in challenging the perceived marginalisation often associated with peri-urban life. Their protests revealed solidarity dynamics and the emergence of alternative spaces of encounter, particularly through the establishment and maintenance of cabins as central hubs for everyday politics (see Section 4.3).

By concentrating on a select group of Yellow Vests protesters, this study deliberately narrows its focus within a larger socio-spatial context, providing detailed insights into their experiences. This methodological choice necessarily means that the broader sentiments and complexities of the entire movement and the wider peri-urban community might not be fully captured, as implied by the limits of ethnographic approaches (e.g Hammersley, 2006; LeCompte & Goetz, 1982). This study, therefore, offers a detailed examination of specific experiences, acknowledging its scope as a segment of a wider narrative. While this approach yields in-depth understanding, it is important to recognize its limitations in representing the full spectrum of experiences within the Yellow Vests movement

or peri-urban life. While providing detailed insights, the analysis does not encompass all aspects or perspectives of the movement or the diverse experiences within peri-urban areas (cf. Blavier, 2021; Blavier & Walker, 2020; Simon, 2005, 2008; Vallance, 2014). This nuanced, focused analysis contributes valuable insights but should be viewed as part of a larger mosaic of peri-urban realities, cautioning against overgeneralization to the entire movement or the peri-urban community. However, the resonance of these analytical insights may suggest patterns and dynamics of living within peri-urban fringes that have wider applicability. The grassroots everyday politics and transformative paths charted by the participants may also reflect a broader struggle for recognition and agency in peri-urban spaces and more broadly in the peripheries.

Bearing this in mind, the choice of Yellow Vests protests as entry to the research also contributed to start "somewhere" my fieldwork journey. Drawing from the map of the Yellow Vests' protests (Figure 2.3), I identified an area where the movement had a significant presence in the South-West of France. The next challenge was to connect with protesters. To do this, I delved into various social media platforms, particularly Facebook – a network favoured by Yellow Vests protesters (see Froio & Romero-Vidal, 2023; Ramaciotti Morales et al., 2022) – in search of relevant groups to initiate my inquiries. Yet, initiating contact proved challenging, as most members either "didn't know" or "didn't trust" me enough to engage or share their experiences. During these initial stages, the value of in-person interactions became abundantly clear, and I recognized that online modes of engagement – as prescribed by the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic context – were inadequate.

When the Covid-19 pandemic receded enough for me to enter the field in person, a chance encounter with a leaflet advertising a "roundabout event" on the outskirts of a small town in South-West France marked the initiation of my fieldwork journey. This was my first immersion into the world of Yellow Vests and peri-urban France (see Chapter 6). As my research journey unfolded, a significant transition occurred. The Yellow Vests informants encountered on this roundabout not only offered valuable insights into their own experiences as protesters but also served as guides within their lived realities as peri-urban inhabitants. This experience yielded a wealth of data and granted me insight into the interactions among participants and the broader living conditions they were protesting. More significantly, it was during this "roundabout event" that one of the participants mentioned the "March of the Forgotten," an endeavour organized by fellow Yellow Vests.

The March of the Forgotten

Two weeks before my initial roundabout event, a small group of Yellow Vests embarked on a journey from Southern France to Paris (Figure 5.1). These protesters were traversing France on foot, town by town, to gather the demands of what they called the "Forgotten France" up to the capital and the political representatives. This collective initiative aimed to rekindle the Yellow Vests movement and national interest for its cause, which had been weakened by the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdowns. Framing the March as a "pilgrimage," the purpose of such initiative was to connect with those who felt left behind in the peripheries and attract media coverage.

Figure 5.1
Official Map of the March of the Forgotten, stages and my point of entry. Source: Facebook, location of "Vallon-en-Sully" added by author.


Figures 5.2 & 5.3
Arrival in Vallon-en-Sully, geared up for the March; First night at the March in abandoned camping toilets in Vallon-en-Sully. Source: author.

I decided to join those who called themselves the "Marchers" and walk with them to Paris. It seemed like an opportunity to forge close relationships with Yellow Vest participants and explore the France I was studying up close. I contacted the March's spokesperson, introducing myself as a "French PhD researcher from Sweden" interested in peripheral France. I joined them midway in Vallon-en-Sully, a small village 400 kilometres from Paris. After hours of train travel and multiple connections, I arrived at the village's modest station (Figure 5.2). There, I found a group of 15 Marchers huddled together in abandoned camping bathroom facilities - a group that would grow in numbers as we neared Paris. Tired from their daily 30-kilometer march, they greeted me with cautious curiosity. As an "outsider," I recognised my positionality was critical (see Section 5.4), and I needed to justify my presence and explain why I stood there, ready to march with them. While they did not reject me outright, they observed my every move, scrutinized my words, and, as I would learn later, suspected me of being a "mole" sent by intelligence services. During those initial days, I dared not take

out a notepad, recorder, or even my phone. I had to prove my genuine interest in the March and the Marchers' cause.

The details of the March, the diverse impressions, and interactions that emerged during this immersive experience will be developed in Chapter 7. For now, I summarize this March as a profoundly enriching experience, brimming with data, connections forged, as much as a personal and physical trial. Marching alongside the Marchers to Paris, I covered 400 kilometres in just under four weeks.

After arduous days of walking, we would find rest wherever we could: on pavements, in abandoned toilets, amidst forests, and occasionally in a gymnasium graciously offered by a supportive mayor or in the homes of local Yellow Vests (Figure 5.3). Some days, a shower or a warm home-cooked meal would feel like a distant luxury. While physically demanding, this March provided an extraordinary journey across the French peripheries, their landscapes, and inhabitants. Moreover, it allowed me to form close bonds with participants, setting the stage for the next phase of my fieldwork: delving into the daily lives and experiences within the French peri-urban peripheries. The Marchers, as detailed in Chapter 7, showcased a wide range of participants within the Yellow Vests movement, including both men and women from various age groups and socio-economic backgrounds - public servants, retirees, unemployed, industrial and agricultural workers, and small business owners. Most resided outside dynamic urban centres, in rural locales, small towns, or large villages. Identifying as "Yellow Vests activists," they all engaged in protests and roundabout occupations since 2018. This diversity was further enriched by activists from alternative protest groups, particularly from urban suburbs, aiming to unify various struggles under the Yellow Vests' banner.

Tour de France and experiencing peri-urban life

To further understand and capture the fabric of peri-urban life, I decided to accompany some of the participants in their daily environments. Having established strong connections with some Marchers, I embarked on a tour of peri-urban France, joining them in their daily lives. Over approximately three months, I traversed the country, from the Pilat region to the Côte d'Azur and finally to Burgundy, spending several weeks in participants' homes (Figure 5.4). Most of the interactions I describe in the forthcoming empirical chapters are taking place in the peri-urban outskirts of a former industrial city, which for reasons of anonymity I refer to as "Springfield."

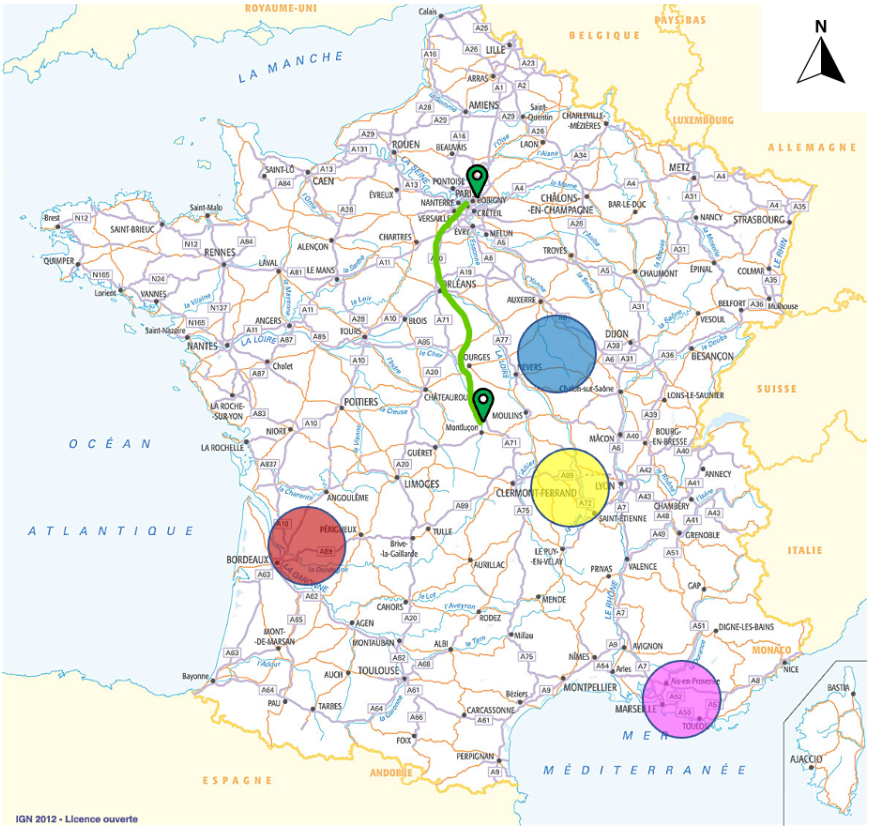


Figure 5.4
Fieldwork locations, an overview. Source: IGN, own modifications

Adopting this pseudonym reflects my effort to navigate the ethical imperatives of confidentiality and the protection of my participants' identities (see Section 5.5). These compelled me to engage in a balancing act, in which I strived to honour the trust placed in me by those who shared their stories, maintaining the authenticity of their experiences while adhering to the ethical standards guiding my inquiry. The choice to focus on Springfield within my empirics was informed by several factors. A substantial share of the participants I encountered during the March hailed from this area, joining the Marchers as a cohesive group. The decision to follow them back to their community was strategic, as it enabled me to observe their activities closely and collect a wealth of insights due to their significant representation.

Figure 5.5
"Living like" the participants in the periphery of Springfield, cleaning a stall for the hay season. Source: author.

Besides, as a region marked by deindustrialization and decentralization dynamics, the peri-urban periphery of Springfield as a fieldwork location offered a rich context to assess the dynamics of peri-urban life. These dynamics were palpable in the participants' daily experiences and mobilities. These factors altogether provided a compelling backdrop to analyse how these participants may then experience, challenge, and transform the various processes shaping their daily realities.

Engaging in Springfield with a dozen participants for over two months, the stories and observations I collected form the empirical narrative detailed in Chapters 8 and 9. My extended stay in this area was also facilitated by the deepening relationships with participants, which allowed for a more immersive engagement. This period enabled me to closely interact with a consistent group of local Yellow Vests, whose lives and relationships were closely intertwined. Staying in the homes of different participants not only afforded me a unique vantage point for continuous involvement in their collective activities, but also a deeper understanding of the nuances in their individual daily lives and personal

narratives. It allowed me to experience in close proximity the fabric of their everyday experiences, landscapes, relationships, practices, and meanings (Figure 5.5), providing a rich empirical basis for the narrative developed in subsequent chapters. Besides, my engagement extended beyond the group I was "living with" in Springfield to include meetings with other Yellow Vests groups. This included a reunion with the rest of the Marchers encountered during the March of the Forgotten on the Côte d'Azur, where I collected some updates and also exchanged on the progress of my research. I also engaged in interactions with regional groups in the Pilat region which would engage and organise some actions with the Springfield participants, actions that I detail in Chapter 9. These encounters supplemented the research with varied insights and experiences from different geographical and social contexts within the Yellow Vests community. By immersing myself in the fieldwork in this manner, I aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of peri-urban life from multiple angles, gathering diverse data sources, while also building trust and rapport with participants.

Participant observations and visuals

Rather than observing from a distance, participant observation involves immersion in the daily lives of the participants and positioning as an active and embedded observer within their milieu (Geertz, 1973). This method possesses a distinctive capability to unveil tacit nuances that often lie concealed beneath the surface (Fetterman, 2007). In my research, participant observation facilitated access to the non-verbal, implicit facets of participants' daily routines, including the rituals, gestures, and unexpressed emotions that moulded their lives. By actively living, working, and engaging with participants in their environments, I acquired first-hand insights into the multifaceted dimensions of their realities, encompassing their spatial configurations, the intricacies of their social networks, and the cadence of their daily lives. This method enabled me to immerse not only in their physical surroundings but also in the intricate social and emotional landscapes that constituted their lived experiences. Additionally, this method allowed for a gradual and organic unfolding of the fieldwork. Such involvement in time enabled the development of deeper relationships and understandings with the participants, leading to a rich and detailed data collection, as much as respectful as possible to the participants' own activities and time. This time-intensive approach not only aligns with ethical research practices but also significantly enhances the depth, authenticity, and responsibility of the research practice (Collignon, 2010).

Along with detailed journal notes, I used photography and videos to capture and document the visible aspects of the peri-urban environment and the participants' embodied experiences. I gathered in total 603 photographs and 395 videos recordings, which I used as means to capture and remember spatial layouts, body language, and the atmosphere of peri-urban life. By using visual documentation, I could record moments in time, preserving elements of unspoken gestures, non-verbal communication, and ambiance that words alone often struggle to preserve. These visuals enabled me also to revisit and share the sights, movements, and emotions that defined the participants' daily lives.

Besides, this visual identity of my ethnographic work has implications for the production of geographical knowledge: writing a lifeworld also implies "showing" it to the world. Such position aligns with an increased interest in visual methods in human geography, brought in as research strategies to get even "closer" to subjects, and involve a "'better' access to the lived, felt, sensed and immediate everyday life" (Oldrup & Carstensen, 2012, p.223). The use of image has indeed been argued as a useful tool to record, show, produce, and further experience geographical knowledge (e.g. Garrett, 2011; Hall, 2009; Oldrup & Carstensen, 2012; Pink, 2007, 2008; Rose, 2003, 2016). An important benefit of the use and production of images in ethnographic research is further to be found in its power to render the unseen somewhat visible, and to potentially qualify an experience, which would remain unobservable otherwise. Among the various tools of visual ethnography (e.g Pink, 2013), my use of visual materials in this thesis aims to record and render tangible the peri-urban lived and capture the various 'stuff' that compose it.

Given the visual nature of my data and ethical considerations around anonymity, I made a conscious decision to convert the photographs used in this thesis into digital drawings (see Section 5.5). Out of the 603 photographs I captured during my fieldwork, I have converted 50 into digital drawings, a process exemplified in Figure 5.6, using tools like Photoshop and PowerPoint. The primary objective behind this transformation was to ensure the anonymity of the participants by rendering their faces in an unidentifiable and blurred manner.

Finally, while participant observation and visual documentation enriched my research, it is important to acknowledge their limitations. One of these is the risk of "going native," where the researcher becomes overly identified with the participants' perspectives, risking the objectivity needed for scholarly work (Fenno, 1978; Hammersley, 2006). Additionally, the "observer effect" presents another challenge, as participants might adjust their behaviour due to the

awareness of being observed, and in my case photographed or filmed (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). To address these issues, I adopted a reflexive approach, constantly aware of these dynamics and striving to minimize my impact on participants' behaviours and interactions. This reflexive stance helped maintain a necessary balance between understanding and critical distance, ensuring that conclusions are drawn from empirical data rather than personal affiliations or biases, thus preserving the integrity of the research findings. I will continue examining my role and positionality as an observer-researcher and its potential influence on the collected data in Section 5.4.

Figure 5.6
Photograph of a roundabout occupied by Yellow Vests, and the corresponding drawing. Source: author.

Conversational interviews

While my initial plan was to conduct semi-structured interviews as defined by Valentine (1997), the conditions of my fieldwork led me to shift towards open conversations. Several factors drove this methodological adjustment. Firstly, traditional interviews were often impractical due to the participants' engagements in activities such as the "March of the Forgotten" or their daily activities and

routines. Secondly, even when interview opportunities arose, participants seemed uneasy with the formalities of the process.

In response to these challenges, and to accommodate the realities of my daily interactions with the participants, I embraced an alternative approach: conversational interviews, as outlined by Given (2008). This approach discards the predefined interview protocol in favour of informal "conversations with purpose" guided by themes rather than questions, and where participants had the autonomy to introduce new topics or ask questions. These themes revolved around daily practices, experiences, relationships, and the impacts of being geographically distanced from urban centres, ensuring that the research question remained relatively addressed and the data collection process stayed in harmony with the overarching research objectives. Such approach was further supported by my immersion in the field which created the conditions necessary for these conversations to take place. My methodological adaptation from formal interviews to conversational interviews, was essentially a responsive and pragmatic shift that accommodated the realities of my daily interactions with the participants. These interactions emerged pivotal in shaping the empirical groundwork of my ethnographic narrative presented in the subsequent chapters (see Part III).

These conversations were consistently recorded using a microphone. I would place the microphone on a table or near the participants and record whenever we engaged in conversations. While the participants were initially aware of its presence, they often forgot about it as our conversations progressed and the hours passed by. This approach resulted in 47 recorded conversations, some of which lasting up to 2 hours each. Additionally, I recorded other types of interactions with participants such as impromptu exchanges and observations. These often provided the most candid insights into the experiences and sentiments of the participants. This is particularly the case when I report some interactions and declarations happening during the March of the Forgotten in Chapter 7. While walking and witnessing some events, some useful material emerged, that was not happening from the setting of an interview, even a conversational one, and where it was rather unpractical to formally record. These empirical items or statements have been spontaneously recorded on video at the moment they happened, or later recorded as fieldnotes in what I refer to in the text as the "fieldwork journal."

5.3 Data analysis and ethnographic writing

The collection of data, as outlined in the previous section, was a dynamic and evolving process. This dynamism led to a continuous interplay between theory and empirical findings. As I immersed myself in the field, the data I collected informed the evolution of the theoretical framework, and conversely, the framework influenced the interpretation of my empirical findings. This intricate dance between theory, methodology and empirics is central to understanding the development of my research, and I will elaborate on the strategies that guided my analysis in this section.

Thematic analysis and coding

Data analysis began with the organization of my dataset, encompassing tasks such as transcribing recorded conversations, categorizing field notes, and cataloguing visual materials. Following the principles of thematic analysis articulated by Braun and Clarke (2006), my objective was to identify recurring themes and patterns within the data. Subsequently, I generated initial codes, and extracted meaningful segments from the data encapsulating key concepts and ideas. These codes then underwent an evolutionary transformation into broader themes as I scrutinized the data, searching for connections and associations. It is crucial to emphasize that this coding process was not mechanical; it was fundamentally interpretive in nature, aligning with the ethos of ethnography (e.g. Van Maanen, 1988). It was instrumental in shaping the development of themes that transcended surface-level observations, delving into the intricate tapestry of meanings and emotions interwoven in the lives of the participants. My comprehension of the peri-urban experience was deeply informed by my reflective engagement with the data.

Ethnographic writing and analysis

The culmination of data analysis is the craft of ethnographic writing. Ethnographic research is more than a recounting of field experiences; it is a transformative storytelling process that conveys the essence of a cultural milieu (Geertz, 1973). In crafting my ethnographic narrative, I drew inspiration from the narrative ethnography approach, following the traditions of Clifford (1990) and Tedlock (1991), which highlight the significance of storytelling as a means of ethnographic representation. This approach allowed me to weave a tapestry of peri-urban life, aiming to provide a vivid and empathetic portrayal of the

participants' experiences and daily practices. Drawing from my fieldwork journal, transcripts, and analytical coding of themes, I constructed a narrative that weaves together their daily routines, aspirations, and experienced struggles. This narrative embraces the non-linearity of lived experiences (Clifford, 1990), as it captures the fluidity of life in the peri-urban, with its ups and downs, its routines and disruptions. Ethnographic writing, in my view, is not about imposing a rigid structure on the data; it is about allowing the data to guide the narrative, letting the voices and experiences of participants resonate through the pages (see also Tedlock, 1991).

Moreover, I embraced an autoethnographic stance in my empirical writing. This choice was less about a predetermined plan and more about adapting to the fieldwork circumstances and the emergent nature of the data, which reflected my contingent proximity and involvement with the participants. Autoethnographic research encourages researchers to engage deeply with their subjects and acknowledge their own subjectivity within the research process (Coffey, 2018; Cutri & Lau, 2022; Davies, 2008; Simonsen, 2022). In my case, it meant becoming an active participant-observer, to some degree sharing in the challenges and triumphs of peri-urban life alongside the participants. This approach blurred the lines between researcher and participant, allowing me to bring a more personal and emotionally resonant dimension to my writing. It also later enabled me to align with my critical phenomenological focus on how emotions and personal perspectives shape meaning and aims to foster empathy, understanding, and transformation in both the researcher and the reader (see Simonsen, 2022).

In the analysis of my ethnographic narrative, I arrived at an approach aligning with my theoretical and conceptual frameworks. This approach emphasises encounters as processes encompassing the experienced, contested and transformed dimensions of peri-urban life outlined in the previous chapters. Drawing from the principles of analytical ethnography (Honer & Hitzler, 2015; Scheffer, 2007; Snow et al., 2003), which emphasize the interconnectedness of events within broader processes, my analysis transcends the treatment of encounters as isolated incidents. It situates these encounters within a process that provides an understanding of the intricate socio-spatial dynamics and experiences that characterize the peri-urban context and how it is lived. Consequently, the empirical chapters in my study serve a dual purpose. Firstly, they construct an ethnographic narrative that vividly portrays the lives, experiences, and perspectives of participants within the multifaceted realities and complexities of peri-urban life. Secondly, these chapters analyse the collected data within the scope of my

theoretical and conceptual frameworks, seeking to uncover underlying processes that shape their lives and how they are embodied, contested, and ultimately transformed.

5.4 Research subjectivities

Central to my analytical journey lies the interplay between my reflexivity and positionality, two integral components deeply intertwined with my identity and the driving forces behind my research. The delicate balance between familiarity and estrangement, the known and the unknown, significantly shaped my role as a researcher as well as the outcomes of this research. This aspect resonates deeply with the notion of "situated knowledge" championed by Haraway (1988). Situated knowledge underscores the significance of acknowledging the context-dependent nature of knowledge production, and how power, privilege, and personal experiences inevitably shaped my research endeavours. By being cognizant of my identity as a Parisian-born researcher delving into French peri-urban life from a temporarily position outside France, I remained acutely aware of the intricate complexities and potential biases that might permeate my work. This necessitated a continuous interrogation of my subjectivity, a commitment to challenge preconceived notions, and an openness to glean insights from the experiences and viewpoints of the individuals I was studying.

Reflexivity

An integral element of qualitative research, reflexivity serves as a guiding principle which encourages researchers to engage in self-reflection and explore their own biases and perspectives throughout the research process (e.g. Alcoff, 1991; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Reflexivity functions like an internal compass, steering the trajectory of our inquiry. This ongoing self-awareness journey allowed me to recognize instances where my perspectives might influence my interpretations and analysis of empirics. Reflexivity acted as a safeguard, prompting me to question my assumptions and preconceptions as they arose during data collection and analysis. It helped me to engage in research with humility and an open mind, ensuring that my subjectivity did not eclipse the voices and experiences of the participants.

Throughout my immersion into the field, I maintained a fieldwork journal to record my evolving thoughts, emotions, and preconceptions. This journal transformed into a reflective mirror, unveiling the subtleties of my subjectivity within my research context. In alignment with Denzin and Lincoln's (2018) call for reflexivity, this journal became a "space" for self-examination, enabling me to scrutinize the impact of my own positionality, my dual roles as both an insider and outsider, and the dynamic shifts in my relationships with research participants. Through this continuous process of introspection, my objective was to as best as possible avoid that my personal perspectives overshadowed narratives and lived realities of the participants. Thus, the fieldwork journal evolved into an indispensable companion on my quest for a nuanced understanding of the peri-urban world.

Drawing upon Bizeul's (2007) insights into the complexities of fieldwork, I implemented this practice to further navigate the challenges posed by my deep immersion in the field and its inevitable "exit." His observations about the emotional involvement that can arise both in and after fieldwork resonate with my own experiences, reinforcing the importance of ongoing reflexivity. As Bizeul (2007) notes, it is inevitable for researchers to form strong emotional connections with the individuals they study, particularly when spending extended periods together (see also Collignon, 2010). This emotional involvement can enhance the quality of research by fostering a deeper understanding of participants' perspectives. This view is also supported by Ritterbusch (2019) who highlights the need for genuine and empathic relationship building with participants over what she calls "participatory bluffing" and the superficial engagement of scholars who briefly consult with communities. However, it can also pose challenges when it comes to maintaining some analytical distance. I recognized in this context that my empathetic perceptions of the participants' lives were a natural part of the ethnographic process, where deep emotional connections and understanding of their perspectives were inevitable and indeed valuable for the richness of the research.

Nonetheless, as Ritterbusch (2019) reminds, it was crucial for me to exert effort both in and out of the field to maintain a critical distance. This was not due to a lack of solidarity or concern, but rather a methodological imperative to preserve the analytic clarity required of a researcher who does not share the same lived realities as the participants. I had to constantly remind myself of the differences between my life experiences and those of the participants. I find that this approach allowed me to honour their narratives and struggles through a lens of empathetic

understanding, without losing sight of my role as researcher. To facilitate this, I engaged in regular self-reflection, acknowledged my evolving emotional responses, and made conscious efforts to separate my own experiences from those of the participants. Additionally, I took strategic breaks from the field to provide emotional distance and clarity. Such instances helped to ensure that my personal connection to the research did not cloud my ability to present a balanced and nuanced portrayal of the participants' experiences.

Positionality

My identity as a Parisian-born French researcher residing in Sweden had implications for my research journey, spanning from my initial interactions with participants to the conveyance of my analysis. Such position placed me in a dual role as an "insider-outsider," as developed by Sattari (2018) and Bukamal (2022). On one hand, my French background and cultural familiarity provided insights and understanding that enriched my research. Coupled with my identity as a "foreign" researcher, it also offered a perspective on peri-urban life by potentially not having some of the preconceived notions or biases that local researchers might carry. This perspective empowered me to pose questions that were occasionally overlooked, as I endeavoured to fathom the intricacies of a world that was simultaneously new and familiar. I shared a common language, cultural references, historical and social context knowledge of France. On the other hand, as a metropolitan Parisian and an international researcher, I recognize my detachment from peri-urban realities, as well as the struggles expressed by Yellow Vests protesters and more broadly peri-urban inhabitants.

My position carried some additional implications. Firstly, on a political level, I had to adjust while navigating the delicate balance between empathy and potential disagreement with the participants' politics. Although not aligning with their political stance, I approached each encounter with an empathetic understanding of the causes and experiences that drove their movement. This empathetic distance was crucial in building trust without compromising the integrity of the research. There were challenges, indeed, in maintaining such detachment during sometimes impassioned discussions, and especially when these were further intensified by the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic context. The political stance of some exchanges I had with participants were indeed significantly intensified by issues surrounding health measures, vaccine scepticism, and conspiracy theories, which proved to be sometimes challenging to deal with at the time from a neutral standpoint. It was a time indeed when everyone had an opinion, and everyone's

position was determined by their emotional and political engagement with such measures and perceptions of the pandemic context. Reverting back to a stance of neutral inquiry proved to be an even greater conscious exercise to manage and explore participants' perspectives without my own views interfering.

Furthermore, my outsider position initially raised suspicions among participants, who occasionally viewed me sceptically, suspecting me of being a "mole" or an informant working for authorities. Overcoming this suspicion required patience and the demonstration of my sincere interest in understanding their lives. Differences in social background may have had a significant impact contributing to this. As noted by Bizeul (2007, p.75), contact in the field can indeed introduce a potential "social conflict" between participants and the researcher. In my case, the clear distinctions in social backgrounds were evident, with participants coming from peri-urban communities while I, as a Parisian-born researcher residing in Sweden, had a different social context. However, it is noteworthy that these differences did not manifest as significant barriers in my research interactions as my Swedish residency, combined with my lack of affiliation with Paris-based institutions, helped dispel any instance of conflict and doubt from the participants. Being referred to as "the Swedish researcher" by participants, due to my affiliation to a foreign university, played a pivotal role in building trust and my integration within their communities.

Lastly, my identity as a woman conducting immersive research in the peri-urban added a significant dimension to my positionality and my interactions with participants. It became evident that my gender fostered a sense of comfort and trust, particularly among female participants, leading to open and candid conversations about their experiences, concerns, and aspirations in great detail. This, in turn, deepened my understanding of women's lived experiences in the peri-urban community. In contrast, interactions with male participants occasionally had different nuances, with some being more reserved or cautious. However, I believe that my gender did not limit my ability to conduct the research or build connections with participants. My goal remained to create a safe and open space for all participants, regardless of gender-related dynamics. While my gender was relevant, it rather enriched my understanding of the peri-urban context and highlighted the importance of considering gender dynamics in ethnographic research (see Davis & Craven, 2016).

Overall, my positionality may have had some implications regarding the authenticity and validity of my findings. To address this, I adhered to ethical research practices and transparency. I documented my positionality and its

potential impact on my analysis, serving as a form of self-auditing to ensure that my interpretations remained firmly grounded in the data rather than unduly influenced by my outsider perspective. The communication of my research outcomes further carried its own set of implications. It was imperative to convey my findings in a manner that struck a balance between the freshness of an outsider's perspective and the depth of understanding acquired through immersion. My goal was to was to safeguard against the potential pitfalls of representation, as highlighted by Spivak (2010; see also Alcoff, 1991), and the inherent power dynamics that can lead to oversimplification, misinterpretation, or distortion when conveying the stories of participants. I was acutely aware of the potential risk of misrepresenting their daily realities and struggles. To mitigate such risk, I proactively adopted an approach that centred on the voices and narratives of the participants themselves. This demanded a commitment to listening, understanding, and faithfully conveying their viewpoints and emotions. Simultaneously, it required me to engage in critical self-reflection to identify and mitigate my own biases and preconceived notions, which might inadvertently lead to misrepresentation.

"Giving back"

Throughout my research journey, the concept of "giving back" played a significant role, driven by ethical and moral responsibilities as a researcher (e.g. Collignon, 2010; Smith, 2021; Staddon, 2014; Swartz, 2011; Tubaro, 2021). This approach emphasizes the importance of recognizing the human aspect of research, promoting collaboration, and fostering shared ownership of the research process and its outcomes. In the context of my research, "giving back" took on multiple dimensions.

First, the very topic of this thesis and my presence in the field have been received by the participants as a means of providing some kind of visibility. It is worth reminding that the Yellow Vests' aspiration was to gain visibility, symbolized by their "high visibility vest" and the disruption of traffic at strategic junctions (see Chapter 1). Perceived to support such visibility by the participants, my research project as well as my participation to their various activities were warmly received as such.

Furthermore, my relationships with some participants extended beyond the fieldwork phase. I visited them while writing the thesis, maintaining personal connections that went beyond the traditional researcher-participant dynamic. As a token of appreciation and reciprocity, I created a catalogue containing my

drawings and photographs, providing them with a tangible representation of their stories. Our discussions about these images not only enriched my understanding of their experiences but also allowed them to actively engage with the research findings and materials. This process was not merely about validating the accuracy of my interpretations; it was also to allow participants to become active contributors to the research process, and ensure that their perspectives were authentically represented (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Shenton, 2004).

Concerns for relativity

Ethnographic research involves complex interplays between the researcher's subjectivity and the construction of an empirical narrative, where the researcher assumes various roles, as a fieldworker, interpreter, analyst, and writer – all contributing to the depiction of a specific social reality (Coffey, 2018; Van Maanen, 1988). This process is not objective; rather, it aims at the creation of a compelling narrative, where the ethnographic author's task isn't to reproduce reality verbatim but to represent it (Coffey, 2018). Recognizing this interpretative nature of ethnographic work is vital, as much as avoiding claims of complete objectivity or wholly systematic and reliable findings (Herbert, 2000).

However, I join those who argue that relativity is not a limitation but an intrinsic value of ethnography, offering multiple perspectives on a given reality and enriching our understanding of culture through diverse angles of view (e.g. Van Maanen, 1988). Subjectivity, in this context, becomes an analytical asset, enabling a deeper immersion in the culture under investigation, to "feel" it and to interpret its meanings more profoundly (Herbert, 2000). Additionally, it is important to recognize that there are no "natural" data in ethnographic research. The world we seek to understand is not a set of objective facts waiting to be uncovered; instead, it is a construct that emerges through the specific social processes of interpretation (Herbert, 2000). Data, from this perspective, are never "naïve" but are always apprehended through the lens of these interpretative processes.

Finally, adhering to Geertz's (1973) concept of "thick description" was foundational in my research approach (see also Atkinson, 2014; Marcus & Cushman, 1982). Instead of presenting dry, isolated facts, I attempted to provide in my empirical chapters rich and detailed accounts of the phenomena I encountered. These descriptions, supported by my visual materials, not only seek to paint a picture of the context but also allow readers to engage critically with the data. This approach sought to transform my research from a one-sided narrative into a multidimensional exploration, where readers could form their own

perspectives while being mindful of the subjectivity inherent in the research process.

5.5 Research ethics

Ethical considerations have played a paramount role in my research, given its personal and subjective nature and recognizing the potential impact it may have on the lives of those involved (see Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Hay et al., 2021; Madison, 2005). As I immersed myself in the peri-urban context and the experiences of participants, upholding their agency and autonomy was a primary commitment. This involved creating an inclusive space for dialogue, respecting their perspectives, and seeking their ongoing feedback. Additionally, more formal steps were taken to safeguard their privacy and ensure accurate representation of their voices in the final narrative.

A cornerstone of my ethical framework is the principle of informed consent. It was not a mere checkbox but an evolving process, acknowledging that consent evolves dynamically with participants (Swedish Higher Education Act, 1992:1434; GDPR, 2016). From the outset of my fieldwork, participants received an explanation of the research, their rights, and the implications of their participation. This information was conveyed both orally and in writing, which explicitly detailed their rights under GDPR guidelines. Participants had the freedom to decline or withdraw from the study without repercussions, including the deletion of previously collected data. Given the visual nature of some data, participants were also given the option to agreeing to being filmed or photographed through written consent. To protect confidentiality in reporting results, visual materials were transformed into drawings used for solely for illustrative purposes (see Section 5.3).

In line with GDPR's data minimization principle (GDPR, 2016), I collected, stored, and utilized personal information only to the extent necessary. Measures were taken to safeguard participant identity and privacy. Collected data underwent coding and anonymization, with pseudonyms replacing names and locations in the text to prevent identification. Pseudonymization was implemented early in the research process. Personally identifiable information, such as names, phone numbers, or addresses, was not recorded or transcribed. Even self-chosen pseudonyms by some participants were altered to ensure anonymity, as these self-given identifiers could potentially lead to identification.

Additionally, specific document references in the empirical text were omitted to protect both identity and location pseudonymization.

All research data and materials, including literature reviews, visual materials, interviews, site visits, and field notes, were securely stored. Physical copies were locked in university facilities, while digital copies were password-secured. A virtual research environment at Lund University ensured controlled access to data, enhancing data security, and offering potential long-term archiving and access post-project completion by authorized university members.

Ethical research mandates honesty and transparency at every stage, which I have upheld by providing participants with clear and open communication about the research's purpose and potential implications. My aim has been to create a secure and inclusive environment for dialogue without fear of harm or exploitation. I have thoroughly assessed and mitigated potential risks associated with the research, maintaining high scholarly standards throughout the process. This commitment is not only a matter of ethical responsibility but also a cornerstone of the credibility and validity of the research findings. I have approached this research with a sense of responsibility to contribute meaningfully to the understanding of peri-urban life. This responsibility is grounded in a commitment to advancing knowledge, informing policy and practice, and ultimately benefiting society as a whole.

Part III

Experiencing, contesting, and transforming peri-urban life

In Part III, I present the empirical exploration of peri-urban life, examining how it is experienced, contested, and transformed. The sequencing of these chapters intentionally deviates from the analytical structure introduced in Chapter 4, opting instead for a narrative that aligns with the empirical chronology detailed in Chapter 5. The intention here is not to disrupt the theoretical coherence but to offer a storyline that reflects the flow of experiences and observations made *in situ*, guided by the voices and actions of those who navigate its dynamics, struggles, and opportunities. By aligning the chapters with the chronological unfolding of fieldwork, I seek to be faithful to the evolving dynamics of my interactions with participants.

Chapter 6 narrates my entry to the field. The chapter is a prelude to my exploration of how Yellow Vest protesters as peri-urban inhabitants may experience, contest, and transform peri-urban life.

Chapter 7 addresses the *contested* dynamics of peri-urban life, showing how Yellow Vests protesters through the March of the Forgotten demonstrate their perceptions, frustrations, and discontent.

Chapter 8 shifts the focus to the *experienced* daily realities and everyday struggles faced by participants as they navigate the complexities of living in the peri-urban.

Finally, in Chapter 9, I explore how peri-urban life, as experienced by the participants, may be *transformed* through their interactions and everyday politics, opening potentials to reshape their identity, belonging, and community, and their overall experience of the peri-urban.

6. Entering peri-urban life: My first roundabout

This chapter narrates a pivotal moment in my exploration of peri-urban life. It not only introduces the Yellow Vests protests as an empirical lens through which I analyse peri-urban experiences; it also sets the stage for my ethnographic journey. Here, the peri-urban emerges as an arena where lived realities are moulded, identities are shaped, and struggles come to life; where spatial, social, and political forces converge and give rise to narratives of lived experiences. Amidst the seemingly ordinary setting of a roundabout, the participants emerge as agents of a contestation and transformation of their socio-spatial condition. The intersection of individual struggles we witness goes beyond the physical boundaries of the roundabout, echoing in the wider phenomenon of peri-urban life, its struggles, and opportunities.

It's Saturday

A meaningful day for many of those wearing the vest.[2] As I arrive at the roundabout walking from the train station, I can already see from afar yellow bright spots assembled. There is indeed a gathering. I feel relieved. I didn't know what nor who I would find there, or even if I would find anything or anybody in such a random location. All I knew was the date, time, and a location, which

[2] The strategic decision by the Yellow Vests to hold their protests on Saturdays from 2018 onwards marked a significant deviation from the conventional scheduling of demonstrations, traditionally orchestrated by official labour unions on weekdays, typically Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays. This choice was primarily informed by the practical consideration that most protesters were employed during the week, and organizing protests on Saturdays enabled broader participation by allowing working individuals to demonstrate and occupy roundabouts without conflicting with their job responsibilities. Moreover, the weekend timing ensured that the protests could capture greater public and media attention, disrupt weekend commerce and traffic more effectively, and symbolize a reclaiming of leisure time for political expression, thereby amplifying their message and impact.

didn't appear anywhere on any map. I walked forty-five minutes from the train station to the edge of a town at the periphery of the Southwest metropole, searching for the location of the protest, the *rond-point de l'Europe* (the Europe roundabout). In this town, there seemed to be only a handful of roundabouts, and finding the right one would only mean to circle around the edge of the town along the main orbital road.

As I finally approach the site (Figure 6.1), a yellow plethora keeps getting thicker; it seems quite a *rendez-vous*. The cluster of yellow-vested protesters is not directly standing on the roundabout itself but rather around it. Most of the attendees are assembled around a makeshift camp built for the day. I find under the tent a table covered with various foodstuffs: croissants, chips, thermos flasks, soda and juice bottles, and beer. Seemingly improvised, the whole setting appears quite convivial; anybody can help his/herself for sustenance. Most people are standing, either engaged in deep conversations, or simply lined up along the roundabout, cheering every time they hear a driver honks, and they are many. A cacophony that, to their ears, sounds like music; as every honk ignites cheers of encouragement, dancing, and validated smiles. Those protesters who have less energy remain seated on camping chairs. They are mostly elderly people, holding a cup filled with coffee to keep hydrated.

This Saturday marks the beginning of a series of weekly gatherings called the "waltz of roundabouts," organized by local yellow vests associations through Facebook groups. The event was advertised with a simple leaflet (Document, 2021d), adorned with yellow vest icons, and calling for "constructive citizens" to gather, share, discuss, and exchange. The leaflet urges the community to "remain united, stay informed, and continue the struggle as victory looms on the horizon" (Document, 2021d). The call concludes with a poignant invitation: "We are still here, Join us!!" While many attendees seemed familiar with one another, this gathering was the first since the national lockdown imposed in March 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

As I mingle deeper into the assembly, I instinctively decide not to wear the yellow vest hidden in my backpack, freshly bought in a sports franchise a couple days ago. So fresh that it is almost too bright, too clean, which will be later noticed by the roundabout attendants: "Oh! A newbie! It's her first roundabout" I will be called out, almost in a teasing way, although not ill-intended.

Figure 6.1
The Europe roundabout. Source: author.

But for now, I feel it might be better to not stand out too much when I enter this unknown world, which I have no practical knowledge of. It is a blind-date, my first encounter with the roundabout and its occupants, whom I so far had speculating about only in writing.

In an instant, all the plans I made in my head to anticipate this first immersion in the field suddenly vanish. All the analytical bullet points are gone. I realize the safety net of theory will be of no use here. All the rational frameworks have abandoned me. All I can feel is my heart beating fast in my chest. I am sweating, starting to feel a bit dizzy. All that remains is instinct, almost a survival one.

This is it, my gate to the field: "abandon all hope ye who enter here," I hear in the back of my mind Dante's famous idiom. As Virgil passing the gates of the Underworld, I enter what would be my own initiation of the peri-urban lifeworld. This roundabout, it is the point of no return: no way out, only a way in and around this journey that is about to start. On this roundabout, the desk scholar abruptly becomes a fieldwork apprentice about to immerse herself in otherness and a deep alteration of herself.

Figure 6.2
Banner on the Europe roundabout, "Yellow Vests/Angry citizens." Source: author.

To the sound of the accordion

Amongst the vibrant exchanges and warm greetings, each interaction is filled with a sense of belonging and unity. At last! Long, it seemed, had they waited to meet again on the roundabouts, like they used to since the start of the movement in 2018, to protest but also to simply "be together." In this regard, the whole atmosphere is nothing but joyful and convivial, one would almost forget it was a demonstration by "angry citizens" against their government, as the big banner crowning the roundabout clearly indicates (Figure 6.2).

Along a visual scene dominated by yellow banners reading "justice," "family," "freedom," and French tricolour flags, the surrounding sounds are not those of protest. Rather, it is an orchestra made of supportive car honks coupled with laughs and conversations, all tinted by loud and constant music in the background. These songs and lyrics, everybody seem to know them by heart, are sung at the top of their voice. Often to the rhythm of an accordion – the emblematic instrument of the working class in the twentieth century – these songs narrate the struggle of "the people," past and present, but in a hopeful way, so much so that they make you want to waltz (Figure 6.3). Notably, the songs *On lâche rien!* (We don't let anything go!) and *Danser encore* (Keeping on dancing) have unofficially become the "roundabout anthems," the melodic expression of

those left behind, as Cleo and others call them. These songs would continue to resonate throughout my journey across the French peri-urban peripheries and their roundabouts.

Figure 6.3
A couple waltzing to the sound of the accordion on the edge of the Europe roundabout. Source: author.

Overall, the whole experience feels like I have invited myself to a giant potluck with strangers, who nonetheless welcome me with warmth, showing genuine curiosity about why I am present. Although, I am not the only one wandering around with a microphone in my hand. A few independent local journalists and video makers are here as well. It seems our presence is not unwelcomed: quite the opposite, some gather around each of us willing to engage in discussions and share their own reason for being on the roundabout today. This eagerness to engage with us underscores the aspiration for their stories and grievances to reach a wider audience.

As I engage in conversations with various attendees, I am being constantly offered something to eat, to drink. I am being handed coffee, sometimes wine, all contained in plastic cups or reused water bottles. The situation oddly resembles what one could experience at the *café du coin*, the neighbourhood café, which is the cornerstone of the everyday life in France. One of the participants, Jean-Pierre, recounts how, before the Yellow Vests and their roundabout occupations, he lamented the loss of such places in his daily life:

> We used to have a *café* in my village, but it closed down. There is nowhere to meet anybody anymore. I was feeling more and more isolated. But then, the roundabouts gave us a place to socialize, to meet new people, and to share our stories. Since the Yellow Vests and my first roundabout, I socialize more than I have in years! (Interview 2).

His sentiment echoes through the conversations and laughter that fill the air on this roundabout. It has become more than just a site of protest; it's a place of spontaneous connection and community, a modern-day *café du coin*.

However, we are far from an urban setting or a bustling city centre where people may convene to socialize over drinks and friendly conversations. Instead, we find ourselves on the outskirts, surrounded by cars and constant noise in a landscape defined by anonymity and transience. This place lacks any centrality; it is what Augé (2008) would call a "non-place" – a space characterized by mobility and devoid of meaningful encounters between individuals. Nothing in the roundabout infrastructure calls for such a gathering and the cultivation of conviviality. And yet, it has transformed into a hub of sociability, where social bonds are forged during the shared experience of protest and a common reason to be here.

Figure 6.4
Roundabout occupants gathering around the makeshift camp on the edge of the Europe roundabout. Source: author.

The camp at the roundabout is ephemeral, constantly dismantled and rebuilt elsewhere on a different roundabout each week (Figure 6.4). The physical location of the roundabout itself holds little significance. What truly matters is that the encounter and sense of community it fosters follow the people who actively bring it to life. Interestingly, although the roundabout is situated in the peri-urban periphery of a big metropole, none of the attendees appear to live nearby. It seems I am the sole person who travelled a short distance by train from the city. Most others have driven, carpooling, and sharing gas expenses from various towns and villages scattered across the region. None of them seem to reside in any neighbouring towns. Nevertheless, they all have travelled and gathered here, to be seen and to connect with one another.

The crowd seems generally more "senior;" most of attendees are over 50 years old. In my conversations with them, I find that they are predominantly employed and earn income, mainly in the agricultural and industrial sectors. If they are not currently working, they have retired after having worked from a young age. They take pride in not relying on government assistance or welfare programs. "I have always worked, I never asked for anything. I derive personal dignity from my work, but it goes unrecognized," shares Cleo, a 60-year-old welder nearing retirement age (Interview 1). She dreads the anticipated cuts to pension budgets.

"I can get by with very little," she says, "my job doesn't exhaust me physically, but I am emotionally drained from fighting for recognition" (Interview 1). Cleo's story is not unique; it is representative of the various narratives I encountered at the roundabout that day.

This day concluded with a collection of individual stories that highlight a sense of being overlooked and unacknowledged by society, employers, and those in positions of power, despite feeling entitled to recognition. These sentiments collected on the Europe roundabout and later in the field would reflect a broader struggle for recognition. This theme, aligning closely with Nancy Fraser's (1995, 1999, 2000) argument that social justice encompasses not just the redistribution of resources but also the need for recognition. This theme will be further explored in Chapter 7. Cleo, like many others, seeks acknowledgment beyond material compensation; it is about respect and validation of their identity and role in their place of work, and more broadly in society. Their narratives encapsulate this struggle for such recognition – a quest not only for economic justice but also for social and emotional validation.

Our roundabout, our world

As the day goes by, people gradually move from the road to the tent, sitting down on the grass in small circles, a bit tired cheering at honking drivers. The air is filled with a variety of conversations: "How are the kids?", "Will you be here next week?", "Come over tomorrow, I'm baking an apple pie," "We need to plan the agenda for the summer and see if the other roundabouts in the region want to join."

Among the crowd, a small group stands out, gathered around a man with a commanding presence (Figure 6.5). Big sunglasses cover his scarred face, battling with an impressive white mane. "He's the Yellow Bear!", I am told, "He's quite famous among us, he's been here from the start and got hit pretty bad by the police." It becomes evident that those who have had encounters with law enforcement, whether intentional or not, gained prominence within the community. Later, I will come to understand that the Yellow Vests movement is not devoid of hero figures, who may have turned into influencers on social media with thousands of "followers." Most of them are men who have been seriously injured during the violent protests in Paris at the movement's inception.

Figure 6.5
Sharing roundabout stories around the Yellow Bear on the edge of the Europe roundabout. Source: author.

Some lost an eye, others their jaw, reminiscent of the disfigured World War I veterans, known as *gueules cassées* (broken faces). These men are regarded by their peers as a mix between martyrs and media celebrities, sought after for selfies and appearances in Facebook Live videos or Snapchat stories. Even within the ranks of the Yellow Vests, an informal hierarchy seems to exist, and for some, there is a sense of pride in belonging to a group associated with someone with such media visibility. Pascal, a 45-year-old farmer, particularly revels in this notion:

> At least I can say I'm friends with someone famous. If it helps me gain recognition, even better! (Interview 4.b).

However, the Yellow Bear does not enjoy unanimous support. Other participants maintain some distance and express a certain wariness. A woman confides her scepticism. Figures like the Yellow Bear, often men exuding charisma by their

presence and journey within the movement, indeed evoke suspicion from some. Within the Yellow Vests, there is a need for leaders, but there is also a quick mistrust of those with overly personal ambitions, with those who seek too much attention. This paradox, which I would witness throughout my interactions with participants, remains a prominent aspect of the Yellow Vests community (see Chapter 9).

This encounter of Yellow Vests on the roundabout presents itself as a distinct reality, a world that is both antagonistic and parallel to the rest of society. It functions as a centre that generates its own social interactions in an otherwise vacant space. I come to realize that most of the attendees have come here to find each other, to reclaim something they felt they had lost along the way. While their contestation forms the foundation of their initial encounter, it soon seems somewhat relegated to the background, serving as a reason, if not a pretext, for being here. It is not that the "struggle" has disappeared, but rather that the participants have unearthed something else. In fact, through their encounter, it seems they have created their own space where they can meet and share similar hardships and life experiences. They discuss, share life stories as they drink their cup of coffee. Cleo wanders around the gathering with her pack of chips, inviting anyone to partake. Elderly couples dance to a melody that evokes memories of joyous days gone by. Alice proudly shows me the ring on her finger, as she and Antoine, whom she met on this very roundabout a couple of years ago, are finally getting married.

But there are also sombre stories. Suddenly, everyone is called to observe a minute of silence in honour of a comrade who recently passed away, a natural death, I am told. He was 75 years old, which is considered old for someone who worked as a welder almost every week of his life since the age of 14. The silence is broken as the assembly starts singing *La Marseillaise*, the French national anthem, echoing the defiance and solidarity of those who once stood guard over the fledgling First Republic during the Revolution. It is a poignant homage to the past, a resonant call that binds the assembly in a common narrative of resistance and hope against the challenges of the present. The homage concludes with a rallying cry that characterizes the movement, a chant I would hear countless times in the following months: "*Gilets jaunes, quel est votre métier? Aouh! Aouh*!" (Yellow vests, what is your vocation? Aouh! Aouh!) Despite their diverse backgrounds and occupations, the yellow vests unite in a shared roar and sense of purpose.

In the peri-urban outskirts of the city, at this ephemeral hub of protest, a distinct form of sociability arises through an encounter. Here, the attendees seem to

embrace their own peripherality, not as a mere geographical fact but as a profound identity marker, and to re-create a living social context of their own, embodying a sense of community and resilience that challenges and redefines their marginalisation. In the peri-urban periphery, these individuals seem to have found a new centre within it, forging new forms of social connection that seemingly had been lost along the way. The yellow vest they wear becomes a symbol that enables them to recognize each other and come together in a place that embodies their shared condition: the roundabout, an insular junction on the outskirts of cities they feel excluded from. Here, the roundabout transforms from a non-place into a space of encounter (Section 4.3) for individuals who have discovered that they shared a common condition and faced similar hardships. This theme is central to the dynamics I will investigate throughout the forthcoming chapters, guiding my analysis of the experienced, contested, and transformed aspects of peri-urban life, which are central to the outcomes of my research. The sentences I heard repeatedly that day, and throughout my months of fieldwork, captures this phenomenon vividly:

> My first roundabout, I realized I was not all by myself. I realized I was not alone feeling what I feel, living what I live (Interview 3).

Each participant has their own unique story about their "first roundabout" experience. Cleo, for instance, shares her perspective:

> I used to feel isolated and alone. But when I discovered the roundabout, I realized I wasn't alone anymore. It was in that moment that I embraced the yellow vest movement (Interview 1).

Similarly, Elena recounts her awakening on 17 November 2018, at the start of the roundabout occupations:

> We were invisible, living in isolation. The first time I joined the roundabout, tears streamed down my face... I had been experiencing loneliness for 20 years... And suddenly, we were no longer isolated individuals. We became a family. We reclaimed our dignity (Interview 3).

Just like a first kiss, a first job, or a first child, the stories of individuals recounting their "first roundabout" experiences hold a special significance. These stories seem to capture new-found identities and signify the creation of a community that unites individual solitudes. They have formed their own "family" that becomes

the foundation for establishing new and relatable relationships. The term "family" has even become a hashtag and a rallying symbol (Figure 6.6). Within this community, they address each other as *tonton* and *tata* (the informal words for uncle and auntie). Elena says:

> We have become like brothers and sisters... I am no longer fighting for myself alone, but for all of us... We have become a family (Interview 3).

Figure 6.6
A moment of friendship on the Europe roundabout, and the back of a yellow vest claiming "Justice #lafamille" (#thefamily). Source: author.

Encountering peri-urban life

This introductory chapter not only serves as an introduction to the empirical exploration of peri-urban life but also as a prologue to the ethnographic journey that defines this thesis, laying the groundwork for themes that I develop in more details in the coming chapters. Its core purpose is to suggest peri-urban life as an active arena, where spatial, social, and political forces converge to shape experiences, identities, and struggles. As we delve deeper into the narrative of the protesters' encounter on the Europe roundabout, we witness intertwining dynamics of peri-urban lived experiences and how they may be contested and potentially transformed.

Within the seemingly ordinary setting of a traffic node at the periphery of a metropole, the Yellow Vests emerge as more than protesters. They become agents embodying a collective voice of frustration and discontent echoing through the peri-urban socio-spatial, economic, and political fabric. In these shared lived experiences and struggles, bonds of solidarity are formed, and we witness an emerging collective identity and sense of community. Here, individual stories intertwine into a chorus that resonates beyond the immediacy of the encounter.

The narrative of this chapter suggests a shift from protest to community, from isolation to connection, from peripherality to self-created centrality. The yellow vest, initially a symbol of protest, becomes a unifying emblem, transforming this roundabout from an occupied traffic junction into a space of encounter. The recurring sentiment – "My first roundabout, I realized I was not all by myself" – encapsulates this transformation, underlining the sense of belonging, solidarity, and shared experience that emerged within the community. This paves the way for my subsequent examination of peri-urban life and how it may be experienced, contested, and transformed by those who personify the peri-urban condition. The participants' encounters on this roundabout epitomize a space where experiential realities of the peri-urban are exposed, shedding light on both the struggles and resilience of its inhabitants. It serves as a starting point for an invitation to scrutinize the processes that shape the peri-urban experience and highlight the empowering agency of those who inhabit it.

7. Contesting: The March of the Forgotten

> Marching all day. It is a way to contest their life and voice their frustration. When we finally arrive, everyone is just trampling each other.
>
> This encounter, it this the matter of their contestation. We embrace, exchange bandages and ointments. Everyone tries to heal themselves as best as they can so they can continue to march tomorrow and not let go of the struggle.
>
> This pain, it is the price they pay for being able to express their protest, for being heard, for being together.
>
> – Fieldwork Journal (April 2021)

The March

Only a few hundred meters left. At last! Like sailors lost at sea, who finally see the coastline on the horizon, we catch sight of our arrival point emerging in the distance. "Land!" Or, rather, "roundabout!" A wave of excitement and relief is palpable among the small company of Marchers. This roundabout is the culmination of our journey over 14 kilometres that had begun more than four hours prior. We pause for lunch, even though there's still 14 kilometres to go. The preference is for sitting on the roundabout, a daily ritual during the March. Not only are roundabouts symbolic of peri-urban France; they also conveniently dot its landscape which we are traversing. In fact, this is precisely why roundabouts became the central location for Yellow Vest occupations back in 2018 (Section 1.1). They offer visibility to passing traffic and serve as a welcome resting place for the weary Marchers.

Walking along departmental roads can be both dangerous as well as exhausting, but it is a necessary sacrifice to be seen by passing motorists and truck drivers.

These roads, which connect towns and villages, see more traffic than one might expect, particularly from cars and freight trucks that are avoiding tolls on the motorway. The journey through France is not as picturesque as it could sound. The constant danger of traffic looms, and as the group marches, the yellow vest serves a dual purpose. Its bright neon colour guarantees our visibility on the road. But it also serves as a powerful symbol, representing the cause the Marchers are marching for: the "Forgotten." It is a tangible representation of the Marchers' shared beliefs and values, and it serves as a reminder of why they are out here, marching together. Besides safety, the vest is to make one's presence known, to remind the public that the Yellow Vests are still alive and well. And it seems to be working. As the Marchers make their way down the road, they are met with honking horns and waves of support from passing drivers, reinvigorating them in their endeavour (Figure 7.1). And some support they need, as they are tired, and so am I!

Walking 28 kilometres a day, four days in a row, can be gruelling, especially when coupled with little sleep and rough accommodation. The previous night has been particularly challenging, as we slept in the toilets of a deserted campsite on the outskirts of a village. Like many other occasions on our journey, we have been denied the use of a local gymnasium by the local mayor, supposedly due to Covid-19 restrictions, though most of the Marchers believe it was because of their association with the Yellow Vest movement. With no other options, we endured a night on the cold, hard floor of these vacant restrooms, devoid of electricity, water, or heating. Unfortunately, this was not the first time we had found ourselves in such conditions, nor would it be the last; it has become a routine. Luckily, for tonight, we secured shelter in the garage of a "Yellow Vest friend," who reached out through the March's Facebook page, where we will finally sleep dry and enjoy a hot shower – the first in four days.

Despite a short night, we woke up as usual at 6 in the morning. Every morning is the same routine: Gabi makes coffee, Simone plans the day's route, and the young ones, including myself, attempt to wake up as best as we can. Thankfully, Nanou is here. Each morning, everyone gets a kiss and a hug from her, putting everyone in a good mood. Once we are ready, we pack up, fold the tents and bags, and stack them into Raphael's truck. He transports luggage and equipment to our next destination. Then we set off to the town hall, our daily starting point, where other local Marchers and Yellow Vests may join us for the day's march at 8.

Figure 7.1
Waiving at a honking truck on the road. Source: author.

Four hours later, we arrive at the edge of the roundabout for lunch. There we find Gio, the Normand anarchist, who follows us closely with his "logistics" car. Gio doesn't walk, he drives his old Renault, carrying water, coffee, bread, and other goodies, supplying the other Marchers at regular intervals every 7 kilometres. At each pit stop, he sets up a folding table and cups. Gio then religiously takes out his flags and hangs them on a signpost (Figure 7.2) while saying: "We have to be seen, and the drivers have to know we're here. And that we are walking for them. The French from villages and small towns, the forgotten France" (Fieldwork Journal, April 2021).

Figure 7.2
March pit stop on a roundabout, getting drinks and snacks out of the "logistics" car, hanging the Normandy flag, a ritual. Source: author.

Gio is proud of his flags. A French flag, joined by the yellow flag of the March and the flag of Normandy, Gio's native region and of "Asterix and the indomitable Gauls" as he says smiling, all flutter in the wind and signal the Marchers' stopover. Whenever they stop, the Marchers in their yellow vests intend to show that "they are here!" as they sing their anthem:

> We are here! We are here! Even if Macron doesn't want it, we're here! For the honour of the workers and for a better world, even if Macron doesn't want it, we're here! (Fieldwork Journal, April 2021)

This is their rallying cry, a melody that could be heard on the roundabouts during the 2018 demonstrations (Gratian, 2023), and which serves as a powerful reminder of the Marchers' presence and determination. Despite the movement having lost momentum in the years that followed, and the challenges posed by the Covid-19 lockdowns, the Marchers continue to sing their anthem with resolute voices as they approach the roundabout. As we reach the intersection, their singing finds quick resonance with a few honking cars arriving at the intersection. As they sing, people come out of their cars wearing the same yellow vests and join the group of marchers resupplying. These people are local

protesters, who, having heard about the March of the Forgotten, came to join the group for a sandwich and a coffee. They brought with them other treats and cakes to energize the group halfway through their daily journey. For since their departure on foot from Montpellier three weeks ago, the marchers had been making some waves on social media and local newspapers (Figures 7.3 & 7.4). One of the newcomers says: "We want to see the Marchers!" (Interview 5).

Another adds:

> They're doing this for us. We can't march because of work, children, bills, distance... but at least we can come out and support them as best we can. They come to see us, in our France (Interview 5).

And continues:

> And it feels so good to be back on a roundabout again, it's been so long! We're finding back the atmosphere, camaraderie, and solidarity that we had found in 2018 (Interview 5).

« GILETS JAUNES »

La « Grande marche des oubliés » passe par le Berry

LUTTE. Le groupe s'est arrêté à Saint-Amand-Montrond hier après-midi. PHOTO GUILLAUME FAUCHERON

La « Grande marche des oubliés », initiative qui regroupe le Syndicat des Gilets jaunes et des collectifs convergents, fait étape dans le Cher cette semaine.

Après être partis de Montpellier (Hérault) le 19 mars dernier et avant d'atteindre Paris le 1er mai prochain, les participants se sont arrêtés à Saint-Amand-Montrond hier. Ils sont quatorze à séjourner dans le Boischaut jusqu'à demain, alors que l'initiative comprend une dizaine de marcheurs permanents.

Le Cher figurait sur la route qui va de Montpellier à Paris. « La marche des oubliés passe par des petites communes, sur des territoires qui sont oubliés, explique Alexandre Torgomian, un des membres du groupe. Elle regroupe des personnes qui en ont marre du système. »

Les participants souhaitent aller à la rencontre des habitants locaux et seront présents aujourd'hui, à partir de 15 heures, sur la place de la République de Saint-Amand-Montrond. La marche fera étape demain à Levet, jeudi à Bourges et vendredi à Foëcy. ■

Guillaume Faucheron

Figure 7.3

Article in *Le Berry Républicain*, local newspaper clip, titled The "Great march crosses the Berry." (Le Berry républicain, 2021) photo blurred for anonymity.

LA FERTÉ-SAINT-AUBIN

La Marche des oubliés a fait étape hier

« Nous réécrivons l'histoire grâce à une marche qui a débuté le 19 mars, de Montpellier, et qui se terminera à Paris. Nous traversons toutes les petites communes de France, à l'écoute du peuple », explique fièrement Isabelle, porte-parole d'un collectif d'une vingtaine de personnes inspiré par le mouvement des gilets jaunes.

Se voulant représentatifs des oubliés du pays, ils portent des revendications fortes qu'ils déposeront devant l'Assemblée nationale le 1er mai à l'issue d'une ultime étape, de Versailles à Paris. Ils souhaitent être écoutés par les représentants du peuple que sont les députés, qu'ils rejettent d'un autre côté. Ils demandent, aussi, que la Constitution soit réécrite et qu'Emmanuel Macron soit destitué par référendum.

La prochaine étape de leur périple, aujourd'hui à Fleury-les-Aubrais, s'annonce problématique, aucun hébergement ne leur ayant été proposé. Ensuite, ils feront route vers Thivernon, où ils sont attendus par la municipalité pour une étape de deux jours.

COLLECTIF. Les marcheurs regroupés lors de leur étape pour la nuit au camping municipal de La Ferté-Saint-Aubin.

Figure 7.4
Article in *La République du Centre*, local newspaper clip, titled "The March of the forgotten made a stop yesterday." (La République du centre, 2021) photo blurred for anonymity.

It's been a while since Yellow Vests have occupied roundabouts. The movement itself has been exhausted by the Covid-19 pandemic and the ensuing restrictions. That's why the March of the Forgotten is finding such popularity among the different groups and collectives that protested at the start of the movement. It is the first time since the start of the pandemic that they are once again visible on the roundabouts and roads of France.

And roundabouts we have crossed as we progressed on our journey across France. Since the departure, the purpose of the March of the Forgotten has been to traverse the country "from countryside to suburbs, from the urban to the rural, from Paris to the French deserts," as the March's official press release puts it (Document, 2021e). The objective of this venture is twofold: to meet and engage with this France, which sees itself marginalised, and to bring attention to it, carrying its demands and grievances to those "up there, in Paris" – as it is commonly referred to by the Marchers.

And it is no easy task to revive the "cause" previously championed by the Yellow Vests and the France they claim to represent. Given the diversity of their backgrounds, the Yellow Vests have faced challenges in overcoming internal divisions to unify their demands during the 2018 roundabout occupations. This necessity became even more apparent as the movement quickly expanded while attracting a diverse array of origins from various parts of France, including urban, rural, and suburban areas. While originating as a response to peri-urban

challenges, the movement evolved into a platform where diverse groups could voice their unique yet interrelated concerns. This included the struggles of people living in isolated rural communities, facing a lack of access to services and infrastructure; as well as residents of suburban areas, who would rather grapple with poverty, unemployment, and discrimination (e.g Depraz, 2019; Kipfer, 2019; Misset & Poullaouec, 2019).

Significantly, the movement saw convergences with groups like the *Comité Adama*, representing racialized youth in the *banlieues* and fights against police violence and systemic racism (Brakni, 2019). This collective was formed after the tragic death of Adama Traoré in 2016, a young black man who died in police custody under controversial circumstances. "In reality, we have been 'Yellow Vests' since our birth" claims a member of the *Comité Adama* interviewed while a joined demonstration with Yellow Vests protesters (in Sana et al., 2019) This perhaps somewhat unexpected alliance with Yellow Vests broadened the movement's cause and reflected a growing acknowledgment of the interconnected nature of social and economic challenges in contemporary France (Brakni, 2019). A strength in demonstrating widespread discontent, this diversity posed however a significant hurdle in formulating a coherent set of demands and solutions that were inclusive of all socio-spatial categories whose needs and aspirations are as varied as the landscapes they inhabit (see also Pailloux & Ripoll, 2019).

At the occasion of the March, a diverse array of representatives from local collectives and interest groups across France, including some from the *banlieues*, united once again. Their aim was to reignite a collective voice, not only for the Yellow Vests but also for the broader demographic they refer to as the "Forgotten." Participants from different regions and backgrounds, each with their demands and interests, gathered once more with a common purpose. This March arises as a new way of rekindling the idea of "convergence," a term commonly heard during the fieldwork, forming a united "block" transcending geographical and social divides, and that is composed of:

> Marchers, citizens forgotten by the system, representing the diversity of this ignored and despised France (...) [who have] disregarded [their] own divergences to convey the message of the people (Document, 2021e).

We are the People

Most of the participants did not know each other before joining the March. Over the past few weeks, they have become friends, colleagues, even "family!" as some

would often say. The group is made up of various individuals and ways of identifying themselves. In the March's official press release (Document, 2021e), their self-identifications suggest a diverse range of motivations for their involvement in the March of the Forgotten, and more broadly in their protest. Marc and Sylvie, the founders of a newly created Yellow Vest Union, are motivated by a desire for organized representation within the movement. Roman, as a member of the "Angry Parents" association, evokes concerns related to family daily life. Katrine, self-identified as "shepherd," is motivated by concerns related to rural livelihoods and the perceived desertion of public and political attention to their cause. The others, most identify themselves as "angry" and as "citizens" who have specific motivations like defence of children, representative of "forgotten regions," labour conditions in peripheries, working precarity etc. The Marchers' self-identifications indicate that the group is highly diverse and multifaceted, coming together for the March with a wide array of concerns that coalesce into an overarching cause.

Throughout my fieldwork, I observed that despite the diversity of grievances among the Marchers and the participants in general, they all align in their belief that they are and represent "the People." This notion of "the People" is an abstraction that is difficult to define. The protesters claim to represent a wide range of groups, such as "the Forgotten French," "peripheral citizens," and "the majority," as referred to in the March's manifesto (Document, 2021c).They also refer to themselves as "those who share the same life"(Document, 2021c). Such ideas of "the People" are quite elusive and serves as a unifier of their different perspectives and individual struggles. In his book *Le Peuple Introuvable* (The Unfound People), Rosenvallon (2002) argues that such concept of "the People" is often invoked in political discourse as a way to legitimize the actions of governments and social movements, but that in reality, it is difficult to identify who or what "the People" actually is (Rosenvallon, 2002).

The Marchers seem to use this concept of "the People" to identify their struggle and connect it to a common entity, which creates a sense of belonging and addresses the isolation of each individual in their struggle (Figure 7.5). This is further displayed in the manifesto of the March, which identifies such collective dimension under a "we" that gathers "the forgotten ones who do not appear on television and who are especially not wanted to be talked about" (Document, 2021c). My analysis suggests that the collective identity within the group of Marchers is built upon a common perception of societal neglect and exclusion. This sense of solidarity among participants emerges not merely from shared

grievances but through deeply felt experiences of "isolation," facing an "uncertain future," enduring "pervasive hardship affecting people of all generations," and suffering from "material deprivation" (Document, 2021c) These expressions, deployed in the March's manifesto, vividly capture the Marchers' ethos and indicate a connection among individuals who see their struggles as both personal and collective, transcending individual circumstances to unite a diverse group through common challenges and aspirations. This strategic alignment not only serves to empower the participants but also underscores the challenges inherent in articulating a cohesive notion of "the People," as it illuminates the complex interplay between shared grievances and the intricacies of diverse personal narratives. By claiming to represent "the People," they further attempt to lend legitimacy to their demands and make them more difficult for authorities to ignore. This collective identity, rooted in shared experiences, unifies their struggles, and amplifies their collective voice in the quest for societal recognition and change.

Figure 7.5
On the back of a yellow vest, a written message: "YES for a free, dignified, and accountable People! All together." Source: author.

The building of such collective identity is further organised against a common group of "enemies," epitomised by the Marchers as "Macron," "them in Paris," and "the ones who don't know what [their] life is like" (Fieldwork Journal, April 2021; Interview 6). This Manichean stance creates a clear division between the protesters and their perceived opponents, who stand as "evil." Such polarization allows the Marchers to formulate a common identity and sense of belonging to the same group, imbued with a sense of legitimacy and purpose. This serves to unify the group and provides a sense of direction, while disregarding individual differences.

Contestation for a dignified life

On the road, the group will be joined along the way by various individuals, totalling more than 300 upon its arrival in Paris on May 1st. Together, the Marchers will cover more than 700 kilometres on foot, from town to town and roundabout to roundabout, meeting with the "forgotten" French and carrying their demands to Paris. These demands, as summarised in the March press release (Document, 2021e), reflect a variety of political and socio-spatial grievances united under the overarching claim to a "dignified life for all." This includes demands for "fair representation, just taxation and social policies," "quality and accessible public services" and, finally, "equality among regions and recognition of the left-behind France" (Document, 2021e).

This quest for a dignified life takes on a concrete form, encapsulated in the words of Richard, one of the dedicated Marchers met earlier on the Europe roundabout, and who has been vocal about his views throughout the journey. His perspective resonates with the sentiments of many others I encountered during the March:

> In reality, this dignified life we seek is deeply intertwined with reclaiming the spaces we inhabit (Interview 4b).

Coming from a peripheral village on the outskirts of a bustling metropole, he paints a grim picture of his hometown's present state, describing it as a place that has gradually withered away. He laments:

> The fabric of our everyday spaces has unravelled. The banks and doctors have vanished. The *cafés* and bustling markets that used to grace the town square have faded into oblivion. The metropole has swallowed everything, and those who make the decisions seem content to let us fade away into obscurity (Interview 4b).

Richard's portrayal of the disappearance of services and communal spaces underscores overarching socio-spatial dynamics impacting everyday lives of communities living in the peripheries. He speaks of the metropole as an insatiable force, devouring not only physical spaces but also eroding the vibrancy of local life in the peri-urban. This phenomenon, as Richard articulates, is exacerbated by decisions made by distant authorities, seemingly indifferent to the gradual erosion of community fabric in these areas. This stark dichotomy has led to a deep-seated feeling of abandonment and neglect, a sentiment that pervaded my interactions with participants throughout the March of the Forgotten (Fieldwork Journal, April-May 2021).

Overall, these sentiments exemplify that the quest for a dignified life transcends mere material demands, resonating with Fraser's (2000, 2008) argument that justice requires both redistribution and recognition. Demanding such a life signifies a multifaceted struggle for agency tied to a reclamation of spaces that have been lost and the daily realities and activities they invoked. This socio-spatial dimension interwoven with the demands of the Marchers suggest the complex interplay between agency, urbanisation, and the essence of community identity. As their footsteps continue to echo on the roads of the March, Richard's narrative remains a poignant reminder of the broader socio-spatial undercurrents that shape their march for change. The demand for a dignified life emerges as a multidimensional aspiration. However, it is important to recognise that these grievances are articulated within an experiential and normative framework. What constitutes a dignified life is also inherently subjective, as it is individually experienced. This suggests that dimensions beyond social, economic, political, and spatial issues can define the lives of those who consider themselves "forgotten." And even more so as it is collectively shared by the Marchers and the ones they claim to represent, regardless of their diversity in terms of location and situation.

Thus, demanding a "dignified life for all" implies individually experiencing a life deemed undignified that is yet shared by others, while collectively formulating another through a common set of demands. In this way, the demand for a dignified life encompasses other demands and serves as the convergence point for both the individual and the collective. It takes on a political dimension, as it is rooted in the shared experience of feeling that one's life is undignified. Despite the diversity of backgrounds and motivations among Marchers, they unite in a common grievance, which speaks to the shared experience of living in the peripheries, both structurally and experientially.

The effort, embodiment of a contestation

After an hour of refuelling our bodies with food, engaging in lively conversation, and giving our legs a well-deserved rest, we set out on the road once again. Gio packs up the folding table and loads it into his Renault. The rest of the newcomers departs in their vehicles to meet us at our destination: the town hall of the next stopover village. But before that, they will be waiting for us at the entrance sign. For every time we arrive at a new village or town, our group of Marchers takes a photo around the entrance sign (Figure 7.6). This routine has become something of a trademark of the March, and every day, a group photo is posted on its Facebook page. Over the days and weeks, these photos have gained popularity and become an iconic part of the March, making the ritual even more popular with those who join us. After the photo, there are only a few kilometres left before our arrival at the town hall. These last minutes are always the hardest.

Past the sign, and after eight hours of walking, most of the Marchers are limping, as am I. The first days of marching were unbelievably arduous and took me by surprise. Especially given the immense physical resilience and tenacity of my fellow Marchers, who are much older than me. Most of them are in their fifties if not sixties. And unlike me, they walked without fail. They hurt, they limped, but they never faltered. Marching alongside them, I searched for the source of this impressive resilience, until I experienced it myself. Faced with such physical pain, one cannot help but wonder: "What the hell am I doing here?" In that moment, the reason for being there becomes evident, nearly a cathartic cause. For me, amidst the aches, it's my research, the completion of my thesis after years of pursuing my PhD. And I can only imagine at this moment my companions' drive for walking across the country wearing their yellow vests despite the pain.

When I inquire about their motivations, their responses reveal the depth of their drive: "because I don't want to live like this anymore," "because life is hard for many people and we must make it visible," "to live with dignity, I have always worked and made it, but now I feel deserted," "to no longer be alone and regain that solidarity and belonging that I had found on the roundabouts and that I lost again during the lockdown" (Interview 6; Fieldwork Journal, April 2021).

This collective pursuit of a dignified life acts as a driving force. It propels them forward, beyond the pain of exertion. Physical pain is the price to pay to express it and make its claim visible on the roads of France, and potentially transform it into a lived reality.

Figure 7.6
Group photo at the entrance of Levet, the next stopover. Source: author.

The togetherness of arrival

Only a few hundred meters left. At last! Finally, we catch sight of our destination. "Land!" Or rather, "roundabout!" But this time it isn't just any roundabout you find along peri-urban roads; it's the one in the town hall square, the central and triumphant roundabout adorned with a statue of a prominent historical local figure. Centrally located, this roundabout serves as a central gathering place for the community, symbolising the town's heritage and serving as a focal point for local civic pride.

Gradually, the Marchers arrive. The tension from the final effort and the silence of the last few meters give way to a wave of relief. As I collapse on the ground, a sudden surge of pain I had been suppressing hits me. I am as sore as I am relieved, and the release is so powerful that I start to cry. I am not alone; we all cry on the square. After this moment, the tears become joyous. "We made it!" Complaints are replaced with embraces (Figure 7.7).

Figure 7.7
Yesterday strangers, two Marchers embrace each other celebrating the arrival after a day's march. Source: author.

Everyone hugs, laughs, and exclaims in unison their hymn: "We are here! We are here…!" In this moment, victory belongs to the Marchers. They have triumphed over the March and the struggle, and they have done it together. Yesterday strangers, today on this square, they are one. And the physical pain, grievance, and loneliness, all have evaporated.

Having arrived, it is time to rest and find a place to sleep. We are fortunate, as the "Yellow Vest friend" who reached out to us a few days ago will be hosting us for the next two nights. Tomorrow is a rest day, as it is every four days of marching, during which we can recharge and participate in events organized by local Yellow Vest collectives. This will also be the chance to take a well-deserved shower and do some laundry at the nearby laundromat. And most importantly, it will provide the opportunity for togetherness. "Being together is what matters most," says Joseph, our host (Interview 7).

Although he lives in the centre of a small town, Joseph, a retired factory engineer, lives a solitary life. His poorly maintained house is a testimony to his precarious living conditions. Although, he sustains with pride: "I manage the end of the month." (Interview 7). Like most of the people I have met, Joseph collects receipts. He keeps every receipt, whether it is for gasoline, groceries, or anything else, and stores them carefully in his wallet. In the evening, he balances his accounts, indexes the day's expenses in a small notebook. This allows him to "keep control" down to the cent. His life is structured by these receipts, witnesses to essential expenses and safeguards against the frivolous ones, which would compromise the "end of the month." He says to me:

> I have control over my expenses. I can't buy frivolous things, but I don't care. Money is not important. What's important is what this March represents, being together, eating together, sharing. We're those who are awake, we bring to light what really matters (Interview 7).

To a significant extent, the Marchers' participation appears to be driven by more than just economic concerns. While they initially wore yellow vests to protest economic hardships in 2018 (see Martin & Islar, 2021), the struggle to make ends meet has now taken a back seat. Instead, a deeper issue has come to the forefront. Joseph expressed this shift:

> Before, I was all alone. I had no control over this. Now, even though life is tough in terms of money, at least I have solidarity (Interview 7b).

Others, like Nanou, have echoed similar sentiments during the March:

> Today, whenever I have a problem, there's someone who comes to help me. Fix the dishwasher, repair a leak. It's less money spent when you have Yellow Vest friends; and it's less solitude too. (Interview 8).

While the participants acknowledge the economic challenges they face, they also stress the newfound sense of solidarity and mutual support they have experienced as Yellow Vests. This underscores their involvement in the March may not solely be driven by economic concerns. As I will further address in Chapter 8, it also constitutes a response to the isolation and lack of solidarity they may have realised they lacked in their previous lives. This strengthens the theme of contesting not only economic hardship but also seeking a sense of belonging and support, which has become a valuable aspect of their participation. This additional dimension can be argued as fuelling the demand for a "dignified life for all." Dignity may not be just about getting the attention of decision-makers and challenging economic precarity; it may be also about forging connections with others and fostering social interactions in everyday life. These encounters with fellow individuals serve as a source of existence and recognition within society (cf. Koefoed, 2023). As exemplified by Joseph, while economic precarity can be managed and contested through daily actions, the lack of connections and solidarity is perceived as beyond one's control and challenging to overcome.

Beyond the March, the question for me remained: how can social ties and opportunities for solidarity be created when there's nobody around to establish them? How can one foster social interaction in the absence of resources and spaces for connecting with others? It might seem like a simple solution, but it's not. When I would ask the Marchers, "Why don't you try to meet people?" the answer isn't so obvious. What does prevent these people, who feel lonely and left behind, from encountering each other in their daily lives? This question lies at the heart of this ethnographic investigation into the lives and experiences of those I have followed and will be further explored in Chapter 8.

Day off

Upon arrival at Joseph's place, rest is not yet on the agenda. Despite our tired feet and legs barely able to stand, we come together in a human chain to unload the sleeping bags and food into the garage that will serve as our living space for the next two days. Although completely empty, the interior will provide us with a dry place to put our bags and sleep. There is even a shower, albeit a bit run down with limited water from the well. However, in our eyes, this place is a cocoon of comfort compared to the previous nights spent sleeping in a field or on a sidewalk. There is enough space for everyone, and even a separate room that can accommodate the "snorers." Because, let's be honest, sleeping more than twenty people in one room next to each other is never really comfortable. Nights without

snoring and odorous outbursts are rare. This is a subject of conversation every morning upon waking, putting us all in good spirits: "Oh Gerard! You snored so loudly last night! I felt like I was being bombed, you made my ancestors tremble!" exclaims Nanou jokingly. "And Momo!" adds her accomplice Gabi, "It's really time for you to wash, I'll never sleep next to you again, your feet stink too much!" (Fieldwork Journal, April 2021). Everyone laughs and shares their stories from the previous night. It is true that one becomes intimate and familiar quickly when walking, eating, and sleeping together for that long. During this experience, pudeur and personal space are luxuries that they have set aside in order to march and be together.

Every day, I set up my sleeping bag beside Nanou, Gabi, and Simone. As women, we regroup. Each of the three women holds a maternal role of sorts, balancing authority with affection. Simone is the March's spokesperson and is responsible for the daily itinerary. She decides on the breaks and maintains contact with public authorities and the Yellow Vests community on Facebook. Nanou embraces the affectionate side, acting as a grandmother. She comforts us after a long day of marching, calling us "honey," hugging and kissing us goodnight before bed. The group takes care of her, making sure she is okay, not too tired, and has enough food and water. She is always served first at dinner, often pasta or rice cooked on a camping stove. Gabi often says: "On the roundabouts, we take care of each other like we take care of our own" (Interview 9).

To Gabi, Nanou is like a big sister, someone she looks up to for advice but also someone she feels responsible for and needs to protect. With her military background, Gabi defends and guards the group against any threats and asserts herself in this role. It is said that she was the one who led and protected her roundabout during the occupation. With her military experience, she acts as the spokesperson to local law enforcement, whenever they visit us. Nanou and Gabi joined the March from the same area in the French Pilat region in South-eastern France, around Springfield. They are inseparable and always lay next to each other, wherever we may be sleeping for the night, be it in a gym, field, barn, living room, or pavement. Although they live just 4 kilometres apart and were strangers until three years ago, they met on their roundabout and have since become an inseparable duo (Figure 7.8).

Everyone settles into the garage, except for the "boys" who will sleep outside under their tent, keep watch, and protect the camp. These guys are known as the "Dobermans," who have a light sleep and are ready for any intervention in case of danger. And danger there is according to the wary Marchers. They believe they

are being spied on and listened to by intelligence agencies. All phones are banned during meetings in case "someone" is listening. Any stranger to the group, for that matter, could turn out to be an "spy" or a "mole" working for the national security services and needs to be investigated. Myself included. It took several days to prove that I was not a "mole from Paris." The first few days, I would never take my phone out of my bag, which I suspect was searched by some of them without my knowledge. The tension although dissipated over the course of the March when I became accepted by the group, to the point of enjoying the same protection as the others from the "Dobermans."

Figure 7.8
Nanou and Gabi, the roundabout sisters, cooling off after a day's march in a gymnasium. Source: author.

These "Dobermans," they are Momo, Leon, and Tom, young men associated with the *Black Bloc* or *Antifa* groups.[3] Coming from stigmatised suburbs and other peri-urban areas, they found a protective role within the Yellow Vests, especially safeguarding women against police violence during the 2018 demonstrations. Often unemployed, former convicts, and neglected by their family and the system, these young men have found a role and identity in these communities where they feel valued as protectors. Nanou often tells us:

> Fortunately, these guys were there, otherwise we would have been massacred. They are our protectors, and we love them in return (Interview 8).

Within the March, these observed gender dynamics illustrate a nuanced interplay of traditional and redefined roles. Women, taking on maternal and authoritative positions, and men, adopting protective roles as "Dobermans," highlight a familial structure that blends emotional support with physical safety. This setup not only reiterates the importance of mutual reliance among participants but also reflects a larger narrative of resistance where marginalized figures find purpose and solidarity. Through this communal living experience, traditional gender roles are both upheld and challenged, showcasing the movement's complex struggle for dignity within a framework of shared care and protection.

Going live

As tomorrow is rest day, the atmosphere tonight is more relaxed than usual. The group gathers outside on old chairs found in Joseph's backyard. It is time for an *apéritif*. Alcohol is generally prohibited during the March, except on rest evenings. And Simone is very attached to this rule:

> We have to be careful of our image. We're public figures now, people are watching us, we are marching for them. The stereotype of the drunken Yellow Vest on the roundabout is not the truth! (Interview 8).

[3] The Black Bloc is a decentralized anti-capitalist protest movement active in France since the early 2000s. During the Yellow Vests movement, some individuals identifying with the Black Bloc engaged in vandalism and violence, particularly in Paris. Their tactics have been criticized by for detracting from the Yellow Vests' message and undermining their cause's legitimacy. However, some argue that the Black Bloc's actions reflect the frustration and anger of a marginalized segment of society and constitute a legitimate form of resistance against what they see as an oppressive and unjust system.

Figure 7.9
Dancing and letting go off the pressure together during rest day. Source: author.

It is true that some images of drunk protesters on roundabouts have circulated a lot since 2018, which seriously damaged the image and credibility of the movement in the public's opinion. But tonight, they can drink in moderation. Leon and Gio open a beer. Nanou and Gerard pour themselves a glass of whisky, their guilty pleasure. Tom, on the other hand, takes care of the music and plays Nanou's favourite song, which reminds her of the times she went dancing in her favourite bar that has since closed in her village. Everyone stands up and takes each other by the waist and dances in a circle (Figure 7.9). We laugh, have fun, the pressure has definitely evaporated. But not entirely because the day of the Marchers is not over.

Tonight indeed, the group goes "live" on Facebook, for which the garage is being turned into a makeshift studio (Figure 7.10). As Yellow Vests protesters, the Marchers are quite familiar with such practices as most of them use social media, particularly live streaming on platforms like Facebook and TikTok, to amplify their visibility and foster a sense of relatedness among the movement. Through these "lives," sometimes collecting hundreds of viewers, they create a direct channel to share their experiences, objectives, and the realities of their protests with a broader audience.

Figure 7.10
Setting up the makeshift studio for the Facebook live with Francis, Yellow Vest influencer. Source: author.

This approach not only enhanced the movement's reach and impact but also strengthened the communal bonds among participants by providing a shared platform for expression and engagement (see also Ramaciotti Morales et al., 2022; Royall, 2020). Indeed, live streaming acts as a tool for real-time communication and solidarity, breaking down geographical barriers and enabling the protesters to maintain momentum, disseminate information quickly, and rally support both locally and nationally.

Approaching Paris, the March is increasingly followed on social media, especially since Francis with his 256k followers has joined the group. He has become an emblematic Yellow Vest figure after suffering a severe facial injury in December 2018 during a demonstration in Paris. Since then, the 40-year-old supermarket manager has become a famous influencer. Marchers and others encountered along the journey eagerly seek a selfie and autographs from him. Francis joined the March for a few days to support the Marchers and amplify the group's visibility on social media.

Paris-based, Francis is one of the "urban Yellow Vests," as he labels himself, for whom "dignity for all" embraces more a financial and social aspect. Like many

others, he demonstrated in Paris on the Champs Élysées, and rarely on roundabouts. Yet, he also eloquently recognises:

> No matter where one lives, in the end, we experience quite the same thing. But I know it's even harder for those who live outside of major cities and in the peripheries. Everything closes, no more factories, no more lively downtown areas, no more stores, no more cafés, nothing to do. No wonder we feel left-behind like this, we are in trouble with the end of the month, and on top of that, we feel alone (Interview 10).

Francis' identification as an "urban Yellow Vest" highlights the variation in experiences between those in urban centres and those in the peripheries. This distinction underscores the significance of spatial dimensions in influencing participants' experiences and the extent of their involvement in seeking a dignified life. The challenges faced by those in peri-urban areas are particularly pronounced, as the lack of centrality and gathering places seems to exacerbate their difficulties (see Chapter 8). Moreover, Francis' presence within the group and his role in orchestrating the Facebook "live" suggests a hierarchy within the movement, where urban protesters enjoy greater visibility and popularity at the national level than their peri-urban counterparts.

Throughout the March of the Forgotten and my interactions with participants, a significant distinction emerged between what could be labelled *urban* and *peri-urban* Yellow Vests (Fieldwork Journal, 2021; Interviews 8 &10). Most Marchers came from peri-urban and rural areas, residing in small towns and villages away from cities. In 2018, the *peri-urban* Yellow Vests' primary protest locations were roundabouts, and their lives seemed notably more secluded compared to their urban counterparts. Those I would call *urban* Yellow Vests who joined the March as we got closer to the capital, on the other hand, predominantly demonstrated on the Champs-Elysées in Paris, gaining substantial global media coverage. They are highly active on social media, boasting sizeable followings and expansive networks. Their interactions largely revolve around the movement, involving general assemblies and planning sessions for future protests in major cities, often in collaboration with unions and organizations (Fieldwork Journal, April 2021). In contrast, *peri-urban* Yellow Vests, including most of the Marchers, dwell in a more localized, intimate, and familiar settings. They form small local groups and frequently gather at each other's homes for coffee and conversations. As later chapters will detail, their social connections are deeply rooted in local ties, extending well beyond the realm of organized protests. Rather than just being

members of a protest movement, they function more like something akin to a close-knit circle, with shared experiences centring around everyday life (see Chapters 8 & 9).

Francis' Facebook "live" event proved highly successful, drawing in over 10k viewers and attracting more than 300 participants for the Marchers' arrival in Paris on Labour Day. However, as they approached the heart of the capital and faced confrontations with the police, the March was abruptly halted. Several Marchers were even arrested before they could reach their intended destination: the National Assembly, where they aimed to voice the grievances of the people to its representatives. It wasn't until the next day that a handful of them knocked on the gates of the building and told the security guards, "Good morning, we are the 'Forgotten People,' we marched across France, and we want to present our demands to our representatives, the deputies" (Figure 7.11; Fieldwork Journal, May 2021). Their efforts were in vain as they were unable to pass the gates or convince anyone of the importance of their cause. Crushed by the immensity and abstraction of the institution, the group turned back, defeated, their endeavours met with the confused and almost amused gaze of the guards.

Figure 7.11
Outside the French National Assembly in Paris, the ultimate stage of the March is being anticlimaxed - the Marchers knocked at the door and were dismissed. Source: author.

That evening, exhausted from weeks of marching and disappointed by their powerlessness against the system, the Marchers shared their goodbyes. These embraces seemed akin to a tear: they hugged, they cried.

It seems hard to say goodbye after everything they've experienced together. The March is over, but the "block" of Marchers remains. Most decide before returning home to meet again soon, for another March, who knows… Yesterday strangers, they are now a family whose bonds seem at this moment almost indissoluble. Momo and Leon even decide to stay with Gabi and help on her farm. They will be close to Nanou who lives nearby, and to other Marchers living in the Springfield region. I would later join them all there, where my exploration of peri-urban life will continue (see Chapter 8 & 9).

The encounter, force of contestation

The empirical narrative in this chapter brings out the significance of the encounter among individuals within the March of the Forgotten. Akin to a "drama" (Merrifield, 2013, Section 4.1), the encounter of the March is a catalyst, bringing together individuals from diverse backgrounds into a collective experience that they perceive as transformative. The March, as an extended encounter, involves a moment of contestation which hinges on shared grievances and common experiences of marginalisation in peri-urban peripheries, effectively contributing to a renewed identity among participants.

The Yellow Vests' contestation originates primarily in socio-economic concerns and perceived political neglect, and the March was an attempt to revive the movement in the aftermath of the Covid pandemic. However, the March also testifies to isolation and lack of solidarity as being significant factors underlying the protesters' grievances. Through the collective experience of the March, participants find validation for their feelings of isolation and the absence of communal support. In the next chapter, I will dig deeper into the experiences of isolation that participants confront and contest during the March, where they are coalesced in an overarching demand for a "dignified life."

This aspiration for a "dignified life" extends beyond material needs to encompass broader dimensions of well-being, community belonging, and recognition of individual worth. In the peri-urban context, where participants often feel marginalized and overlooked, the pursuit of a dignified life takes on added

significance as it challenges systemic inequalities and seeks to address the underlying factors contributing to their sense of marginalisation. By rallying around this common goal, participants in the March not only assert their demands for economic justice and political representation but also affirm their dignity as individuals whose experiences are deserving of recognition. This shared recognition sparks a transformative journey on experiential and political fronts, acting as a force of contestation, which further constructs a new collective identity, a source of purpose that empowers participants to see themselves as integral members of a larger collective with a unified aspiration. The March, as an encounter, in this way represents a dynamic process that bestows upon participants more than a shared cause. It enables a collective identity empowering individuals to perceive themselves as participants in a shared struggle that extends beyond their individual lives. It serves as a source of strength and purpose, propelling them forward despite physical discomfort and formidable challenges. Through this practice of contestation, participants embark on a collective journey of empowerment and transformation.

It is important to note here the March of the Forgotten represents an extraordinary and, to some extent, "extreme" case both in terms of its forms and scale. While this instance of contestation may not mirror the experiences of all peri-urban inhabitants, it can, however, shed light on dynamics and factors shaping the lives of marginalized communities in peri-urban areas. As Flyvbjerg (2011) argues, extreme cases can help challenge conventional paradigms and push the boundaries of understanding. The March is an example of this, as it can serve as a compelling case to bring out key features of peri-urban life, which can be applied more widely. While the March may exhibit some specific characteristics, it exemplifies dynamics that hold relevance for peri-urban communities confronting similar challenges and aspiration for dignity within marginalized and often-overlooked regions.

In sum, approaching the March of the Forgotten as an encounter reveals a dynamic process that not only unifies participants and imparts a political purpose, but also embodies their struggle against peri-urban marginalisation, endowing them with newfound roles and identities. This contestation transcends individual lives and giving rise to potent forces that both embodies and challenges the spatial, social, and political complexities of the peri-urban condition. Through this moment and practice of contestation, the participants transcend their experienced marginalisation and embark on a collective journey of empowerment and transformation.

The next chapter will provide deeper explorations of individual stories, shedding light on what I propose to be a key source of their grievances: experiences of isolation that have significantly influenced their perspectives, and the underlying motivations driving their inclination to seek encounters such as the March and roundabouts occupations. Through an engagement with the participants' lives and the environments contributing to their sense of marginalisation, I will uncover the lived realities that may shape their perception of isolation and their quest for a "dignified life," ultimately leading them to view solitude as a shared experience rooted in their peri-urban lives.

8. Experiencing: Peri-urban lives

> Living this peri-urban life. So close to the city, and yet, it has never been so far. Where we go in circles without encountering each other. It's a prison without bars, and the jailer is this space made of grey concrete.
>
> - Fieldwork Journal (July 2021)

Little house in the periphery

It's 7 a.m. I get up. The house is awake.

I've been staying with Gabi for a few days now, on the outskirts of Springfield. I plan to spend several weeks here, alongside Gabi, Nanou, Virgile and their local Yellow Vest group, all of whom live in the surrounding area. I'm staying with Gabi where there's the most room. Unlike the others, who all live in small rent-controlled apartments in nearby villages, Gabi lives in her 90-year-old father Jacques's farm.

Dressed in a dirty pair of jeans and a t-shirt, I'm ready to head to the kitchen where I find Gabi. She's been up for two hours already, and it's coffee break time. As usual, she's sitting at the kitchen table, a cup of overwhelmingly sweet black coffee in her left hand, a cigarette in the other. Before my presence interrupts her, her gaze seems lost in the void and silence. She appears lost in thought, sitting alone at the round table.

The kitchen is the heart of the house. Despite the building's two-story layout and a notably spacious, sparsely furnished living room, it is the kitchen, positioned near the entrance, where all activities converge (Figure 8.1). It is where people come together to eat, talk, drink coffee or a glass of wine, smoke. The chairs around the table are the only places to sit. This is where visitors settle in, mostly without knocking at the front door. There is a lot of traffic in the farm, with Nanou, Zach, Virgile, and clients stopping by.

Figure 8.1
The kitchen, centre of the daily life at Gabi's farm. Source: author.

"Especially since the roundabout," Gabi mentions, "it brings life and a little good cheer to the day" (Interview 9). But today, Gabi is not in a good mood. She appears stressed. She looks tired, as always, but even more than usual today. Her face, tanned by the sun and wrinkled by life, seems resigned to the idea of getting back to work. There's so much to do here. And yesterday, it rained.

The storms of the previous day were uncommon for the season, and the outpouring of rain couldn't have come at a worse time. Gabi is in the midst of "making the hay" from her fields (Figure 8.2). For a week, she cuts the high grass with her tractor and must turn it over twice in four days to dry it before bundling it into bales. If it rains once the hay is cut, it risks rotting and she has to dry it further. Yesterday's rain delays the process even more, and she needs the hay as quickly as possible to sell the surplus to local farmers. She considers herself lucky because the farm has a lot of land and can feed her horses independently during the winter while selling the surplus bales and earning a few hundred extra euros. However, climate change and decreasing harvests threaten her profit. And she greatly needs it.

Figure 8.2
Gabi returns to the hayfield after the storm, driving her tractor. Source: author.

Gabi struggles both physically and financially to keep up. With her father too old, she finds herself alone running the horse boarding farm. Gabi's appearance carries the traces of her dedicated work. Her figure, weathered by the elements, speaks to the demands of her labour and the challenges she has faced over time. There is, however, a depth of knowledge and resilience in her eyes, a testimony to her unwavering spirit. Despite her fatigue, she still carries herself with strength and a steadfast resolve, which also speaks of the years she spent serving in the military. A military veteran, she retired from her military career to take over the farm from her aging father. Although, her military pension and farm income are not enough to make ends meet with household expenses and farm operation costs added on.

Despite the long hours and hard work, Gabi works tirelessly without complaint, rising at 5 am and retiring at 10 pm every day (Figure 8.3).

Seated at the kitchen table with her hands crossed, she lets out a sigh:

> It's hard. I'm alone. Alone in my life, alone in my farm. I've never had anyone to support me. Where would I have found them anyway? (Interview 9).

Figure 8.3
Cigarette break on a chair outside, a moment of solace for Gabi as she rests from her work. Source: author.

Yet, after a contemplating moment, she pounds her fist on the table and points her finger to me:

> But that was before! That was before the roundabout, where everything changed for me, where I emerged from my solitude and finally found a family. I was no longer an orphan (Interview 9).

I ask her what this solitude was: "What was your life like before you went to the roundabout?" (Interview 9). Gabi looks at me intently, takes a drag of her cigarette like a soldier, crushes it in the ashtray. She stands up and says: "It was solitude, separation, emptiness" (Interview 9). And she goes back to her haymaking in silence. I follow her.

Gabi's experience of isolation is not unique. It resonates with the experiences of many other women I have encountered during my fieldwork. In general, the daily lives of these women highlight the isolation and loneliness that often accompanies being a working-class woman. Their demanding schedules, characterized by early

mornings and late nights, leave little room for rest or leisure. Despite their hard work, these women often find themselves feeling isolated and lacking the support, meaningful relationships, and social connections they crave. Many of the Yellow Vest protesters I have met include a significant number of women who must juggle multiple roles, such as caring for children and the elderly, managing their work, and dealing with unemployment. The combination of these factors creates distinct challenges for women in these communities, sometimes reinforcing traditional gender roles and expectations (cf. Gallot, 2019; Kergoat, 2012). For instance, women may be expected to shoulder a greater portion of caretaking responsibilities and may face marginalisation, as exemplified in Gabi's case. She not only manages the farm's future but also fulfils the expectations of taking care of her father. However, this should not imply that this experience of isolation is not, albeit differently, experienced by men, as I recount later in this chapter.

Peri-urban errands

Once the hay is turned and the horse boxes cleaned, it's time to go grocery shopping. Gabi is relieved, she still has gas in her old Toyota, no need to spend more today. We leave the farm and drive down the small road towards Springfield. After only a couple of kilometres, the picturesque countryside landscape suddenly gives way to large concrete hangars. Although the farm and its activity may be of the "rural" world, we are close to the ring road that surrounds the former industrial stronghold of Springfield and its 150,000 inhabitants. Suddenly, traffic thickens, the lane widens, and roundabouts flourish on the road.

"Look, there it is, our roundabout!" Gabi exclaims, pointing ahead of us. The roundabout itself is unremarkable. However, as we approach, one sees in its centre and its edges a couple of yellow vests hanging from the trees along with a few yellow tinsel strands, remnants of a past occupation by Yellow Vests protesters (Figure 8.4). "We're here! We're here!", Gabi begins to sing loudly, like a ritual every time she drives around it: "This is where it all happened! The struggle, the encounters, the beginning of the Cabin! The beginning of everything" (Interview 12). The emotion in her words starkly contrasts with the anonymous appearance this traffic junction may hold for most of its users. But not for Gabi, or its occupants. This roundabout, it is the ground zero of their "new life," the more colourful life they believe will not only alleviate their solitude, counteract not just their economic and social grievances but also bring political acknowledgment and empowerment.

Figure 8.4
Yellow vests hanging from the trees on the edge of the roundabout, once occupied by Gabi and her group of protesters on the peri-urban outskirts of Springfield. Source: author.

Around the roundabout unfolds a monochromatic landscape of grey storage houses, standing as silent sentinels of the peri-urban reality, a familiar sight for anyone who has driven through the peri-urban outskirts of a city or town in France (Figure 8.5). On these roundabouts, instead of a picturesque rural landscape, you are more likely to notice a succession of low-cost franchise hotels, large grey warehouses, car parks, fast-food outlets, and supermarket logos (Figure 8.6). The only splashes of colour emerge from billboards relentlessly reminding you how much money you can save by buying more. Around this single circle, there are so many possibilities and choices to make. Everything you might require is conveniently available from this roundabout, a hub where numerous services converge hypermarkets, shopping centres, petrol stations, utility stores, clothing outlets, pet and baby shops. It's precisely this convenience that led Gabi and her fellow protesters to select this specific roundabout for their occupation. There's even a laundromat available for those who need to do some laundry while shopping for the week.

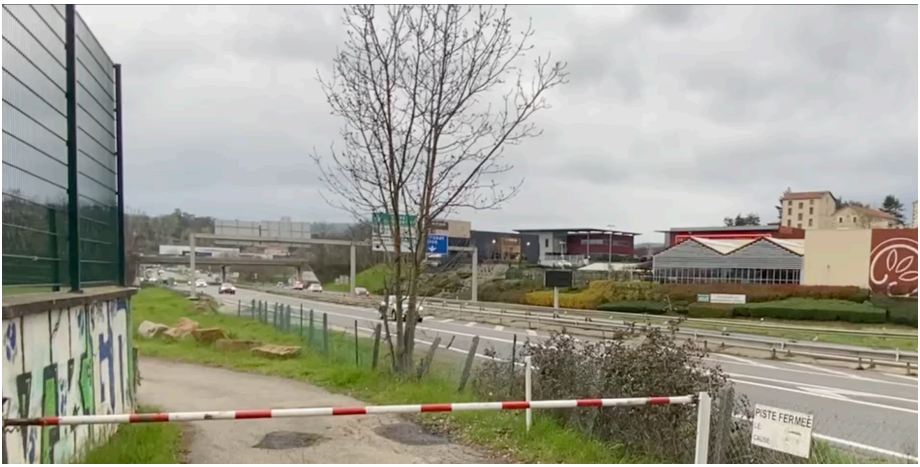


Figure 8.5
At the edge of the roundabout, along a main road, unfolds the typical landscape of the peri-urban, with a row of warehouses, commercial and industrial buildings. Source: author.

Figure 8.6
Driver's view of the roundabout in Saint-Doulchard, radiating towards supermarkets, utility stores and a gas station on the outskirts of Bourges. Source: author.

This landscape, marked by its homogeneity and designed primarily for consumer activities, represents what some have referred to as the "ugly France" (e.g. De Jarcy & Remy, 2010), a term embraced by many participants in my research to describe the France they live in. In this context, everything seems to lack aesthetic qualities. The sensation of making personal choices and exerting control while driving,

navigating directions, is abruptly disrupted by the encircling expanse of asphalt, a grid of parked cars regimentally aligned in front of various brand outlets. Within this setting, the roundabout itself reflects this functional anonymity: its central island is devoid of any decorum. It serves as a structure designed to get you to your destination. It does not offer a sensory experience, but rather suppresses it in favour of another, a more functional one: the experience of consumption and standardisation. The roundabout structures the peri-urban landscape as much as it embodies its standardization of the experience of its residents and users. This sentiment is well encapsulated by Virgile when recounting his daily mobilities:

> The roundabout is part of everyday life. It perfectly sums up everyone's daily routine, you cross it when you go to work, do your shopping. We don't realize it because we do it every day, but we always pass through a roundabout. It represents our life! (Interview 11).

The homogenous landscape found in these peri-urban commercial zones, typically clustered around roundabouts, serves as telling illustration of the homogenization process described by Lefebvre (1970; 1974). This landscape frequently displays a standardisation of physical space, with recurring and similar architectural designs, signage and brand establishments across different locations (see also Augé, 2008). This homogenisation results in a uniform spatial experience irrespective of its specific location, eroding the "use value" of space, as Lefebvre (1968/1974) would describe it (see Chapter 4). Within peri-urban areas, this commercial landscape erases local distinctions, fostering a sense of uniformity. It imposes a standardised way of using and experiencing space, and limits, Lefebvre (1974) contends, individuals' perceptions and agency. These homogenised spaces of these areas tend to be rigid, restricting opportunities for creative and spontaneous use.

And this spontaneous use of space, Gabi and the other participants in Springfield seem to lose it whenever they run some errands. These standardized commercial landscapes can be argued to limit their capacity for creative and improvisational interaction with their surroundings. For costs reasons, everyone does their shopping in these outskirts of the city. None of them actually live in the city but in the surrounding municipalities beyond the main beltway. These areas are closer and more accessible from the highway. It is impossible to enjoy the shops in the centre of Springfield, not only because of the higher prices, but also because it is simply impossible to park there, especially since the recent urban policies that banish the car in favour of less polluting means of transportation (cf. Savary, 2023). As Gabi and others have expressed, the "city has become inaccessible" for

them (Interview 11, 12). While they all have cars, essential for their more remote residences, their mobility ironically restricts them from the city centre where parking spaces have become scarce and expensive. Moreover, Gabi tells me:

> What's the point of going there? Small shops are disappearing more and more, and for those that remain, the prices are simply unaffordable, I can't buy my baguette every day for 3 euros, and it's costly in gas, it's just impossible (Interview 12).

Virgile echoes similar sentiments: for his shopping, he doesn't go to the small shops which are too expensive. He says:

> I'm used to going to the big hypermarkets, you can find everything and at reasonable prices. Small local shops are fewer and fewer too. They are disappearing from the squares. Where I live, it's Lidl or nothing. There are banks, insurance companies, but no more food or clothes (Interview 11).

Even in the neighbouring village of Gabi's farm, it is now difficult to find places to shop due to competition from shopping centres or because it's too expensive. The local bakery recently closed as well, with the owners relocating to a shopping mall with more customers in reach. To buy her baguette, Gabi now must either go there or use the new baguette "vending machine" installed at the village entry (Figure 8.7). In the shopping centre, everything is cheaper, at least, and in the same place. Food, tools, and other useful services. Gabi even washes her sheets in the winter at the laundromat in the supermarket parking lot (Figure 8.8). This way, she can take care of her laundry while doing her shopping, saving on electricity costs.

This shift in daily routines reflects a wider trend in rural areas transitioning to peri-urban spaces, where the benefits of lower costs and convenience clash with the erosion of traditional community practices. The centralisation of shopping options reveals the changes in social dynamics and personal practices that come with peri-urban development. Gabi and Virgile's experiences exemplify here the change in practices and mobilities rural communities undergo in response to the evolving landscape of local economies within the peri-urban context.

Figure 8.7
Baguette "vending machine" in the peri-ubran outskirts of Springfield, with the label "Your artisan baker's Baguette available anytime." Source: author.

Figure 8.8
At the laundromat in the supermarket parking lot on the outskirts of Springfield, waiting for the drying cycle to finish. Source: author.

Ghost town

The growing urbanisation of their daily environment has not only affected Gabi and Virgile's shopping habits; it has also impacted further the livelihood of small business owners in the surrounding villages and towns bordering the city.

In Saint-Jean, Nanou's village located 5 kilometres west of Springfield, the only open café is managed by Amir, who laments this phenomenon. He tells me:

> Times are tough, it feels like we're a dying breed (Interview 13).

Rent prices, inflation, combined with competition from big franchises, they all have hurt local businesses. Nevertheless, he considers himself lucky:

> I'm still here, the old folks still come to play the lottery, and the workers who live nearby come for their coffee and cigarettes in the morning (Interview 13).

Nanou often goes there to enjoy coffee or a small glass of whiskey (Figure 8.9). But she never stays for long:

> I may be a grandmother and retired, but I'm not old yet. And there's only elderly people here. Where are the people? We don't meet anyone anymore. I want to talk, I want to meet, I want to flirt and have fun. Thankfully, now there's the Cabin for that... (Interview 13).

Urban sprawl, along with the establishment of extensive commercial zones in peri-urban areas, has contributed to the rise of big-box retailers and hypermarkets at the edge of cities and require extensive car use for access (see Roux, 2016, 2017). Consequently, traditional high streets and small local shops in neighbouring villages have faced decline and been progressively disappearing over the years due to the competition from large franchises offering lower prices and convenience.

These local shops, known as *commerces de proximité* in French, typically provide essential services like grocery stores, bakeries, cafés, and pharmacies. They have historically played a vital role in fostering a sense of community in urban neighbourhoods and rural villages (Roux, 2016; Varanda, 2005). These businesses serve as essential points of encounter, exchange, and communication for both residents and visitors, helping to cultivate a sense of belonging and local identity.

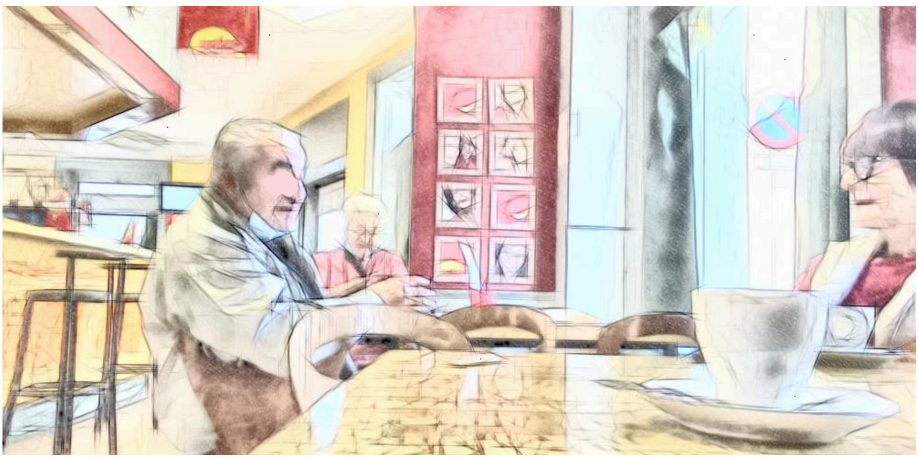


Figure 8.9
At the neighbourhood café, Nanou chats with an elderly couple. Source: author.

The disappearance of these shops has been associated with the erosion of centrality and the loss of community identity. As Roux (2016) points out, the establishment of commercial zones in peri-urban areas has contributed to the fragmentation of urban space, the dilution of its social and economic vitality, and a growing sense of disconnection and social dislocation among residents. Davezies (2012) has further examined this phenomenon, highlighting the importance of *commerces de proximité* as a source of social cohesion in neighbourhoods and villages. He argues that their disappearance is contributing to the fragmentation of urban spaces and the emergence of "territorial inequalities" between different parts of the city, and more broadly between big cities and smaller towns and villages (Davezies, 2012). This phenomenon has been extensively studied in the fields of geography and urban planning, both in France and internationally, underscoring the detrimental consequences of urban sprawl on the environment and social cohesion (e.g. Burton et al., 2003; Sassen, 2001). Furthermore, the proliferation of discount retailers, particularly in peri-urban areas, has been associated with the homogenization of the retail landscape and the reduction of local diversity (e.g. Coe & Wrigley, 2007). In summary, the progressive disappearance of local businesses in favour of large commercial zones in peri-urban areas carries substantial implications for the social and economic fabric of these regions in France and beyond.

With everything in the same spot, Gabi's mobilities are limited in both space and time. She works at the farm, does her shopping in the commercial area, and returns home. Before, she used to go to Springfield a lot. That's where she met her ex-husband 20 years ago, where she used to meet friends, go to the movies. Nanou also told me how she used to love going to dance in bars after her shift at the factory. At the time, she worked as a textile worker before she retrained as a hotel chambermaid after being laid off due to the factory closure. She told me that her life was that of a worker, where means were limited, but life was full of energy and people. She recalls with nostalgia:

> We would get together at the end of the day to have a drink, chat, flirt... we were happy, even if life was hard, but at least we were together (Interview 13).

These times are over: the workers bars and small village dance halls have closed along with the factories, as so has the local cinema. The cinema has been relocated to the shopping centre, but "we don't go there anymore! It lacks character! I don't want to watch a movie in a big ugly container, and it's too expensive anyway,"

complains Gabi (Interview 12), pointing to the large cinema complex across from the supermarket.

Today in Springfield, for Gabi and Nanou, there are no more places to meet, to encounter one another. It is one of the cities that has undergone a profound transformation, mirroring the economic and social changes brought about by the decline of its traditional industries. The city was once a hub of industrial activity, particularly in the textile and manufacturing sectors. However, as these industries declined and moved to other locations with lower labour costs, the impact of deindustrialization on Springfield and its people has been significant. The loss of industrial jobs compelled many inhabitants to seek work in other sectors or relocate to different areas, resulting in a notable decline in their overall quality of life. Evolving along the economic changes, the social fabric changed accordingly: exchanges with the participants reveal a palpable sense of loss and disconnection within the community (Interview 11, 13). Former social hubs like bars and worker's clubs, which once played a central role in fostering connections, have disappeared. These changes have been far-reaching, affecting the economic stability and quality of life of the city's residents and those depending on it.

Despite these challenges, Springfield today is on a path of renewal, with efforts underway to revitalize its economy and position itself as a leader in emerging sectors. The city has embraced new technologies and creative industries, such as the arts and design, and is now home to a thriving cultural scene. In recent years, Springfield has also invested heavily in urban renewal and revitalization, with the construction of new public spaces, cultural venues, and infrastructure such as a university and a design centre. These efforts are aimed at revitalizing the city's economy, improving the quality of life for residents, and positioning the city as a dynamic and forward-looking city for the future as the municipal Agenda 2030 report discloses.

For Gabi and her group, the supposed resurgence of Springfield doesn't appear to hold much promise. In fact, the city has seemingly become more distant and less inviting to them, particularly because they reside in its peri-urban outskirts. Nothing incentivizes them to go there, both financially, physically, and socially. They are "driven out" even though they depend on it. Nevertheless, without the city, its density, and dynamism, they would also be deprived of all these commercial and service areas where supermarkets, hospitals, and leisure activities are now located.

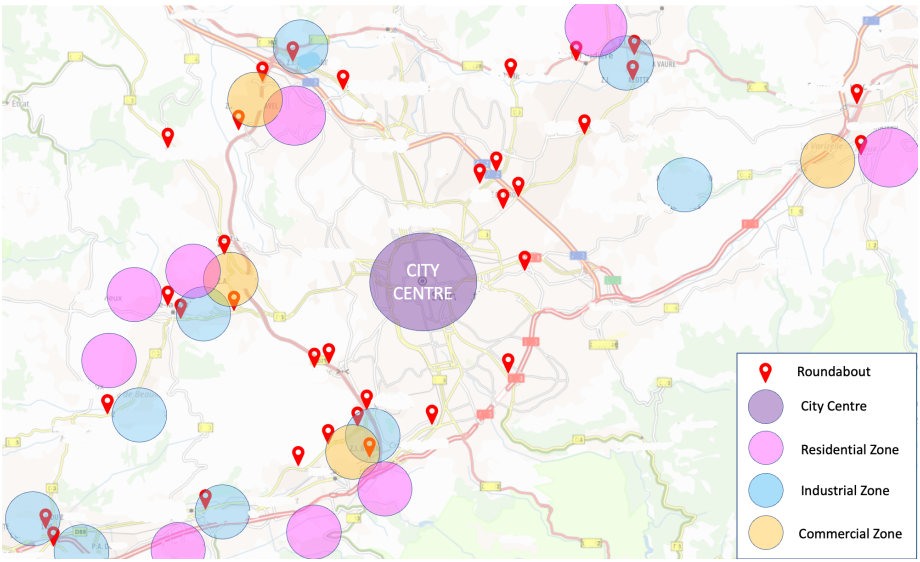


Figure 8.10
The peri-urban periphery of Springfield, an archipelago of zones operated by roundabouts. Source: author.

In addition to financial difficulties, this spatial "lock in" (see Nilsen et al., 2023) adds to the condition of downgrading inherent to the peri-urban life, marked by a dependence on the city while simultaneously being "rejected" by it. And this spatiality structures the periphery of cities into "zones" in which the sprawl is efficiently distributed and structured by the roundabout. People residing in the peri-urban periphery can fulfil their daily needs, such as work, consumption, and leisure, without having to go to the city centre (Figure 8.10).

Trials of life

After our shopping, Gabi and I return to the farm. She is pleased to have found some beef ribs on sale, which is rather unusual as she usually sticks to pork, which is more within her budget. Despite the high cost of meat, Gabi wants to cook with it every day:

> The day I can't eat meat will be the end for me, and I can't deal with that (Interview 12).

This sentiment was echoed by many of the participants. Eating meat and being able to afford it is important in their daily lives, despite their financial insecurity. To them, meat is not a frivolous expense, and it contributes to the symbolism of a stable life, even if they cannot always afford it. As in the past, when only the wealthy could afford to eat meat on a regular basis, meat still marks a symbolic line between poverty and relative wealth, and the participants do not want to symbolically cross it.

Tonight's menu is beef ribs and rice with butter. For dessert there will be some cream cheese from a neighbouring farmer with whom Gabi has bartered for hay. Hopefully there will be enough, as there will be an extra place set at the table: when we return to the farm, to our surprise, Bertrand is here! We met during the March of the Forgotten and he has come for a few days to take part in tomorrow's meeting to create what is called the "New Agora," a new political organisation for the upcoming presidential elections (see Chapter 9). He has come to represent his own collective: the People's Caravan (Figure 8.11). His group of Yellow Vests travels from town to town in Burgundy with the aim of encouraging local people to express themselves, get involved and come together. In the next chapter, I will look more closely at the activities of the People's Caravan and its political and community dimension, as well as the reason why Bertrand came to Gabi's. Here, what I want to highlight is Bertrand's story. His life journey demonstrates an alignment of the peri-urban experience and a condition of peripheral living with what Gabi and others can experience despite living elsewhere. Wherever they live and whatever their life journeys, a common narrative of solitude emerges.

Like many, Bertrand was a Yellow Vest from the start. For him, occupying a roundabout was an opportunity to take part in a popular uprising that, for the first time since May 1968, was taking place on a national scale and not just in Paris. This local dimension is important to him because it allowed him to meet and engage with people from his region and create a lasting bond over time. He credits this local aspect and the convergence on the roundabout for allowing him to rediscover, as he puts it:

> A sense of fraternity and a feeling of belonging to something socially important (Interview 14).

Figure 8.11
Unfolding the People's Caravan during the March of the Forgotten. Source: author.

Together with other protesters, he created the People's Caravan. Since then, Bertrand has felt useful and less alone, having found what he calls "a purpose in life." Before that, he describes his life as "subject to exclusion" (Interview 14). A few years ago, he could not have imagined such a future. Formerly a university lecturer, he travelled and taught French literature at a prestigious Canadian university. Returning to France after a few years, he settled in a dynamic metropole in the South-West, where he accumulated short-term contracts at the local university.

But when he finished his last semester, he suddenly found himself without a job offer, unemployed and faced with the difficulty of finding another position elsewhere. This event marked the beginning of a downward spiral for Bertrand, who had to leave the metropolitan area because he no longer could pay his rent and support himself properly, as his unemployment benefit was too low for city life. He had no choice but to return to live in his father's house in central

Burgundy, in a town 20 kilometres from a major city. Since then, Bertrand has lived a life of isolation, insecurity, and lack of social interaction.

Bertrand's journey through this transition was fraught with difficulties, as he struggled to adapt to a life removed from the bustling city. He candidly shared with me the challenges he faced:

> What is difficult is to adapt to a life outside the city. It's very difficult to live with. I have to go out. Sometimes I go crazy at night. I go for walks. But it doesn't help, even though it feels good. I used to be a night owl; I always went out. I always went to the cinema, to cafés. I met a lot of people. It's overwhelming (Interview 14).

He continued, acknowledging the emotional turmoil he endured:

> This exclusion, it's a form of submission, passivity, loss of will. I am no longer in control of my destiny. I am subjected to everything. I am subjected to unemployment, to being reduced to living in this periphery, although I have always lived in a city. I was a city mouse, an outgoing man. Then, I no longer knew who I was. Until the roundabout… (Interview 14).

Bertrand openly admitted to me that without the encounters on the roundabout and the sense of belonging he found there, it would have affected his well-being. Bertrand tried actively to overcome his marginalisation and reintegrate into society by looking for a teaching job in the area. But his efforts were in vain, as no one was hiring, not even in the nearby city. The universities had been absorbed by the larger cities, necessitating relocation to teach. In his region, there were no prospects, not even a high school teaching position. Yet, Bertrand discovered a renewed sense of purpose through his involvement in the People's Caravan, organising events to educate people about their rights and their future. He explained:

> Becoming a Yellow Vest became my way of not becoming a victim, of taking control of my life as a social individual who belongs to a community and contributes to its livelihood (Interview 14).

Although the individuals presented in this narrative have different profiles and experiences, they testify of a life in peri-urban peripheries characterised by solitude and a lack of social connections. The lived experiences depicted here contradict

the idea of a conscious choice, challenging narratives that portray the peri-urban as an "opportune" space that many choose to live in for access to cheaper individual property and increased safety compared to the suburbs (*banlieues*) (see Chapter 2; Marchal & Stébé, 2018). Instead of being a choice, living in the peri-urban appears here to be "endured" (Marchal & Stébé, 2018), indicating a situation of constraint, often due to economic pressures or more generally a "trial of life," as described by Rosenvallon (2021). At first sight, none of the participants I met in Springfield seem to have chosen where they live today; they were born there. They worked there and never left, except for Gabi, who was more mobile during her military career but returned to take over her father's farm.

This phenomenon is common in France and has been documented in various studies (Haran et al., 2018; INSEE, 2021; Péron & Perona, 2018).These reports show that French people tend to live and die in the area where they were born. This is due to several factors, including a strong attachment to one's place of origin, cultural roots and social networks, and a lack of geographical mobility due to employment opportunities. And the proportion of individuals living in the region where they were born varies considerably based on one's socio-economic profile: for example, farmers and workers are overwhelmingly born in the region where they live (74% and 55% respectively), compared to just over a quarter of managers (28%) (Haran et al., 2018, p.64). The Springfield participants belong to the first category of people who did not leave their hometown, relying on their work as workers and farmers, and who witnessed the deindustrialisation of their sectors. When the factories closed, it was too late to move elsewhere. But they always found a way to carry on.

Only few of the participants are unemployed. Despite the layoffs, many of them have adapted to new jobs. Nanou, a former textile worker, became a hotel maid; Zach, a former welder, became a handyman and plumber; and Patrick, a former car factory worker, now works as a janitor at the town hall. None of them has been unemployed in recent years, and they are proud of it. Gabi told me:

> We are not dependent. The Yellow Vest is a worker. We don't complain, we act, we get by (Interview 9).

Although they did not choose to be born there, for some reason they have stayed in their birthplace, even if living there contributes to their loneliness and marginalisation. "The grass is not necessarily greener elsewhere, and this is our home," says Nanou (Interview 15). This sense of peripherality here is determined by origin: they were born there, they grew up there, they worked there, and that's

where they live. I refer to this condition as peripherality by "lineage," denoting a lived experience that isn't chosen but rather conditioned by a lack of geographical mobility and a strong attachment to one's original place of residence.

In contrast, Bertrand's story exemplifies more of an experience of the periphery by "accident." His journey is marked by a degree of mobility, having worked in various positions in France and abroad. The source of his peripheral relegation is more rooted in what Rosenvallon (2021) refers to as a "trial of life" that shifts one's situation into "another world" (2021, p.79). For Bertrand, this shift was the sudden onset of unemployment from which he could not recover. Forced to leave the metropole and relocate to his father's house in peripheral Burgundy, this led to a spatial social decent, trapping him in a cycle of economic, social, and personal instability from which he could not escape. In addition to socio-economic variables, Rosenvallon (2021) conceptualises these "trials of life" in line with Sanding's (2011) concept of precarity by including a strong dimension of personal anxiety and uncertainty in social and, in this case, spatial relegation. This phenomenon of peripheralization extends beyond *a priori* geographical or occupational origins, and encompasses individual life stories, broadening the origins of these experiences of exclusion.

These narratives, despite their diverse origins, illustrate a shared experience characterized by the solitude of living in a peri-urban environment, on the fringes of dynamic territories where mobility is reduced, and opportunities for social interaction are almost non-existent. These distinct individual experiences coalesce around a shared sense of isolation, exclusion, and separation from the rest of society, enacted through space, and leading to frustration, loss of self-worth and identity. Irrespective of the roots of these experiences, they ultimately converge into a unified one. These different individual experiences of solitude converge in what Rosenvallon (2021) calls a "community of experience," where they came to be shared and brought together when the Yellow Vests encountered each other on roundabouts. Regardless of their origins, their experiences turned out to be the same at heart. The participants who convened at the roundabouts were able to connect over a common challenge, establishing a true community. They managed to "build a legion," as Gabi and other Yellow Vests encountered expressed it (Interviews 3 & 9), forming a community bound by a shared 'endured' experience and shaped by a common peri-urban condition.

This life, that was before…

Sitting in the kitchen, we finish our meal. Tired from the journey, Bertrand decides to retire to his makeshift bed in his truck, not wanting to take advantage of Gabi's hospitality. Meanwhile, Jacques, the father, remains at the table where he spent most of the day smoking one Gauloise after another. Gabi, on the other hand, finishes clearing the table and washing the dishes by hand. There is no dishwasher, it helps keeping the costs down. Then she serves herself some coffee, less sweet, so that she can sleep well tonight. It is 8 pm, and normally she would retire to her room and prepare for bed. On the farm, we go to bed early. But not tonight. Because today is Friday.

Tomorrow is weekend, and it usually means a day of rest. Although the work at Gabi's farm rarely stops, especially in times of harvesting. But rain is forecasted for tomorrow, so haymaking is halted for the next few days until the soil dries up. So, tonight is a night out! Especially since my presence at Gabi's farm incentivizes the group to show me the surroundings and the meeting places, regardless how few. Tonight, Gabi wants to have a "girls' night out" and have drinks together with Nanou at the Balto Café, which she knows well. A girls' night, but with Virgile, as usual. After a well-deserved shower, I put on my best clothes: jeans, a sailor suit, and a pair of trainers. As I head back to the kitchen, I am quite surprised how much I underestimated the depth of the event that is about to unfold. My casual look pales in comparison with the ladies' chosen outfit. I barely recognize Gabi wearing a light strapless dress. Gone are the dark and ready-to-be dirty clothes, giving way for bright yellow and green flower prints and frills. Vanished are the muddy boots, replaced by ostentatiously glittery high heels. She put make-up on, some blue eye shade and pink lipstick, together with a pair of shiny rings hanging from her ears as the final touch. Gabi looks like a different persona, as she wants to be so:

> Tonight, I'm going out, which I rarely do, and I want to look pretty, which I almost never do and who knows? Maybe tonight is the night! Maybe I will finally meet someone, which never happens of course. Who could I meet here? I wasn't lucky enough to meet someone on the roundabout, like Nanou where she met Zach (Interview 16).

Speaking of the devil, enters Nanou, soon followed by Virgile. Nanou looks primed too, as she always does. She seems to be a 'coquette' woman, who takes care of her appearance and the way she dresses. She usually wears pink clothes,

and her hair is impeccably cut and dyed, which she tends to by herself. She is proud to be feminine and to look attractive, even if she is not so young anymore: for "looking good makes you feel good. And it is important to feel good if you want to make it. Even if life is sad most of the time, we can still put some colours in it!" (Interview 16). Virgile acquiesces with a nod and leans towards me from the other side of the kitchen table pointing at the two women proudly displaying their colours:

> I am so lucky for Gabi and Nanou to be here, otherwise my life would be very sad and colourless. You see, that's what the roundabout is, it's the colour, it's the colour in life! (Interview 16).

Gabi adds loudly:

> It's yellow! It is the sun back into our lives! (Interview 16).

For Virgile, like most of the participants, his life has changed since his first visit to the roundabout. Virgile works as a security guard at the Springfield hospital. At the hospital, the 28-year-old feels useful. He feels like he's helping people, protecting them. In fact, it was this sense of purpose that led him to become a volunteer firefighter and first responder in his free time. However, he never really managed to establish meaningful connections outside of work. His geographical situation doesn't help either. He lives far from the centre of Springfield, where people his age with similar interests could get together. In a word, Virgile feels lonely in his life, and it remains a mystery to him:

> I work, I have colleagues, I'm not asocial. But I never met people outside of this. With my colleagues, we can go to a restaurant together, but we don't talk about our little problems. We don't want to marginalize ourselves with that (Interview 11).

As he speaks, Virgile's tone begins to show some emotion. He continues:

> At the roundabout, people took the time to talk to each other. We had restaurant owners who brought food, even if they didn't have time because of work. Even if people didn't have time, they took it to come and help us, or contribute to this effort to create a new sociability between people. Everybody is accepted for who they are. We are different, but we are all in the same boat (interview 11).

While embracing Virgile (Figure 8.12), Nanou adds:

> And that's how we met! Without the roundabout, we would never have met this lovely young man. (Interview 16).

It is true that the trio seems rather original: a retired chambermaid, a sergeant major converted into a horse breeder, and a young hospital security guard. All live within 10 kilometres of each other. And yet they had never met before: because of their age, their occupation, but also because of the lack of places where they could have met and get to know each other.

Figure 8.12
Nanou and Virgile, an improbable friendly duo sealed on a roundabout. Source: author.

Although all three live on the outskirts of Springfield, they never go there, because there is "nowhere to go." Either because it's too expensive, or because the small shops and bistros in the area they could afford have disappeared. It took a roundabout, "their" roundabout, and a yellow vest, for Gabi, Nanou and Virgile, and the others, to encounter each other, at first, and then unite in a new sociability.

But tonight, they decided to meet outside the roundabout, outside their "Cabin," and have a drink at a local bar. The four of us pile into Gabi's car and drive to the Balto Café, the only bar bistro in the surrounding village. Ironically, the Balto Café is located on a roundabout in the centre of the village. It seems to be one of the few establishments open in the area.

The streets are quiet and empty for a Friday night. Despite the mild temperature of a June evening, the terrace is almost empty, with only one table occupied. Inside, there seemed to be some activity: a buzz of people and noise coming from the outside. Looking around, I notice a big screen: it's football night. The live game has attracted a few customers, mostly men, beer in hand, completely absorbed in the last minutes of the first half.

Apart from the modest gathering of football fans, the place is empty, or at least devoid of people, as three rather vocal Terriers reign supreme, sniffing at the newcomers' feet and welcoming them to their territory. They are the dogs of the owner, Blandine, who welcomes us with familiarity at the sight of Gabi. The two women know each other, Gabi seems to be a regular. But they haven't seen each other for a long time. In fact, since the Yellow Vests, Gabi doesn't come very often.

We order our drinks. Nanou gets a whiskey, Gabi a vodka, and Virgile a lemonade. While we are waiting for our orders, I ask Gabi if she comes often to the Balto. She replies that she used to, "before everything started" (Interview 17). It was the only bar in the area where there was a bit of a crowd. But she never really felt comfortable there. She always came alone, and she became tired of some labels she felt were stuck to her. It's not easy to be a divorced single woman, especially in a small community. She also felt that others had never really accepted her because of her somewhat authoritative personality and military background. "I have a big mouth, I say things, and I say them loud and clear. And people here don't like loud people!" (Interview 17). Especially since the Yellow Vests, Nanou adds, where many people in neighbouring communities did not support the movement because of the stigmas spread in the media. For some, the image of the reactionary and noisy Yellow Vest on roundabouts remains ingrained. And the

Covid-19 pandemic has not helped. The debate over vaccines and health passes has further divided people. Many Yellow Vests have become anti-vaccine and anti-government, no matter what. While many bar and restaurant owners relied on these policies to reopen their businesses after over a year of lockdown. In these conditions, the former occupants of the roundabouts were perceived more as a nuisance, too obstructive, and sometimes spreading too radical a message.

Virgile adds:

> And then, there's the Cabin, and it changed everything (Interview 17).

Gabi agrees. The Cabin was a makeshift infrastructure built on the roundabouts that served as a refuge for its occupants. It sheltered them from bad weather and kept them warm (see Chapter 1). Although Gabi and her group haven't been back to their roundabout since the beginning of the pandemic, the Cabin on the other hand has survived, being relocated in Gabi's farm fields. It's the new meeting place for Gabi, Nanou, Virgile, and the others. And it's true that since it became "liveable," the group goes less and less to bars, where they feel less welcome. And I suspect Blandine, the Balto owner, to be somewhat aware and wary of this phenomenon. As we sip our drinks in peace, she comes to our table, one of her Terriers in her arms, and asks: "So, how's it going at the Cabin? Hasn't it collapsed yet? I'm sure you're doing shady stuff in there" (Interview 17). Her smile betrays a hint of contempt. Gabi retorts with humour, "Oh, you know! Whatever we do in there, nothing will stop us..." The Terrier emits a low growl, betraying his owner's displeasure. With a smirk on her face, Blandine gives us our change and goes back inside to take care of her loyal customers absorbed by the football match.

The tension is palpable on this sadly empty terrace. "Okay, that's enough, let's go!" announces Nanou a little jadedly, "this place is lame, as always. We'll go back to Gabi's, go to the Cabin, and have a drink. I'll call the others!" Gabi agrees. She gets up, her chin held high and proud, and heads towards the Toyota, swaying in her high heels, dressed far too elegantly for this somewhat aborted attempt at a night out. Virgile follows. Our nocturnal escapade into the "outside world" did not last a mere hour. I could sense my companions feeling disappointed, yet relieved to return to their own "world:" the one where they can truly be themselves, as Gabi put it, "and be together without judgment" (Interview 17). This world is the one that I am about to depict in the next chapter, delving into its dynamics and exploring the various ways in which its members transform their experience of solitude into one of belonging, solidarity, and community.

Experiencing the peri-urban: isolation and no encounters

This chapter explored the interplay between peri-urban space, social dynamics, and individual experiences, revealing a complex tapestry dominated by isolation. The narratives show how the peri-urban, moulded by economic and urban change, produces an environment marked by loss of individual agency, loss of spontaneous use of space, a decline of opportunities and spaces for encounters. This captures the paradoxical urbanisation patterns that produce the participants' daily experiences. Despite their geographical proximity to urban centres, they remain detached from opportunities and centrality offered by these central hubs. This detachment has a significant impact on their daily lived experiences, which is characterized by isolation and social disconnection.

Prior to becoming Yellow Vests protesters and creating spaces for encounters such as the Cabin (see Chapter 9), the participants' stories illustrate a socio-spatial condition produced by a dearth of opportunities for interaction. This condition is shaped by several interrelated factors: the gradual decline of local businesses and establishments, the disappearance of traditional meeting places within their communities, and the limitations of personal mobilities due to spatial and economic constraints. As local enterprises dwindle, including shops, cafés, and communal spaces, the opportunities for encounters become increasingly scarce. Simultaneously, the participants find themselves constrained by the spatial layout of their environment and the economic realities of their circumstances, which restrict their ability to engage with the wider social fabric beyond their immediate surroundings. This convergence of factors creates a sense of isolation and disconnection, despite their physical proximity to urban centres and the potential resources and opportunities they offer.

The disappearance of opportunities and spaces for encounters stands out as a defining characteristic of peri-urban life. As the community hubs disappear and mobility becomes increasingly restricted and homogenised, the opportunities for interpersonal interaction have dwindled. This has a profound impact on the lived experiences of those living in these areas. The multifaceted experiences of isolation are not limited to any single category of individuals. Rather, this chapter brings to light how individual stories, whether rooted in geographical origins or shaped by evolving life circumstances, coalesce into a shared and collective experience of isolation. This shared condition binds individuals together, propelling them into

a shared sense of seclusion that seemingly offers little possibility for meaningful encounters.

The next chapter addresses the transformation of these experiences through the Cabin, which evolves from being a roundabout shelter against the elements to an emblem of transforming peri-urban experience. This reveals a path towards the rekindling of communal bonds and belonging among participants, countering the dominant process of the production and disenfranchisement of peri-urban life. As the Cabin beckons, it ushers us into a realm where encounters reshape the peri-urban and its production, serving as a conduit to a new chapter wherein solitude is countered by the transformative power of the protesters' encounters. These encounters infuse vitality into the desolate landscape of isolation, nurturing connections that reshape the contours of the peri-urban lived experience.

9. Transforming: The Cabin

> The Cabin, where isolation transforms into a new life.
>
> The Cabin is the encounter where we imagine being able to live differently in the peri-urban solitude and make this imagination possible. It is a utopia disguised in the real. The Cabin is where we find a place, even though it may not exist outside of it.
>
> – Fieldwork Journal (July 2021)

Leaving the old world behind

Saturday mornings at the farm are a time of relative calm compared to the hustle and bustle of the weekdays. It's 9 am. Upon entering the kitchen, as usual, I find Gabi, seated at the table across from her father Jacques, both holding cups of coffee and smoking a cigarette. As I take a seat at the table with my cup of coffee, Jacques directs his attention towards me (Figure 9.1) and says:

> You see, they complain about their lives. But let's not exaggerate – we're not exactly living in poverty. My daughter's generation and her group of "yellows," I don't even know what they're protesting for. People will always find something to complain about. That's just the way it is (Interview 18).

I then realize that the topic of Gabi's activities with her group of Yellow Vests is once again put on the table. This kind of exchange between father and daughter is something I will witness many times during my stay at Gabi's.

Jacques, born before World War II, often demonstrates incomprehension towards his daughter's involvement with the Yellow Vests. His life was synonymous with hard work and modest ascension in the agricultural and trading world, and he takes pride in his own accomplishments and in not complaining: "that's just the way it is," signifying some sort of stoic acceptance of the status quo.

Jacques talked to me a lot during my stay at the farm. Sitting in the kitchen, his days pass slowly as he smokes his Gauloises and silently surveys the room, waiting for an unexpected visitor. Although his body is beginning to fail him, his mind remains sharp. My presence gives him an opportunity to talk about his life, to reminisce, to return to the past and avoid dwelling on the inevitability of old age.

Figure 9.1
"That's just the way it is," Jacques narrating the old times, next to his daughter's yellow vest.
Source: author.

In our conversations, he presents himself as a self-made man of his time. Ward of the Nation[4] and having left school at 16, he managed to find work as a plumber and did whatever he could to make ends meet. It was either that or end up on the streets. He says:

> I never asked anyone for anything. I worked 12 hours a day, vacations were rare. I did what I could to make it. But it wasn't heroic. It was just the way things were (Interview 19).

After many rough years, he finally bought the old run-down farm and turned it into a horse boarding farm, renting out the remaining space to a neighbouring hotelier who ran an inn. Jacques takes pride in his farm. He renovated it single-handedly and it now runs fairly well.

Today Jacques is old, but he finds that he lives in fair conditions, with a "suitable" pension. Society is giving back to him and rewarding his efforts. His body aches, but he doesn't complain. This makes him all the more perplexed with regards to his daughter's alleged grievances:

> I understand that she wants to help people, but she has to stop. She's not unhappy. She has a military pension and I'm leaving her the farm (Interview 19).

For Jacques, the roundabout occupants have no reason to complain: they have a place to live and enough to live on. For him, being happy boils down to the triad of a house, a car, and a pension, and he believes it does not justify complaining or striving for what he calls an "absurd privilege" (Interview 19).

In face of her father's stoicism, Gabi offers a different perspective. She argues that her father fails to understand the struggle of the Yellow Vests, as he reduces everything to money and material possessions. Gabi's outlook on life and social justice rooted in her reluctance to accept a life resigned to her father's "the way things are." For Gabi, that social and economic systems are not permanent and immutable, and the Yellow Vests' cause is not about complaining, but about claiming a right that is owed to them: the right to live with dignity:

[4] "*Pupille de la Nation*" is a legal status in France, which translates to "Ward of the Nation" in English. It refers to children who have lost their parents due to war or other circumstances deemed to be in service to the nation. This status entitles them to certain rights and protections provided by the state.

> For me, for us, what matters is dignity. If people gathered on roundabouts, it was to find a certain humanity in a dehumanized world. All we want is to have a dignified life (Interview 18).

While material conditions are important for a life of sufficiency, Gabi emphasizes the importance of dignity as a source of balance and social and fiscal justice. She continues:

> A dignified life, it is about to be recognized for one's work, for one's value. It is to be together, and not being silenced and isolated, without monetary, spatial, or symbolic barriers (Interview 18).

This quest for dignity echoes a theme that has previously crossed the empirical narratives of this thesis (see also Chapter 7), which provide insights into the Yellow Vests' core motivations. It is not solely about economic grievances; it is also a deeper fight for respect, recognition, and a right to live with dignity. Moreover, the pursuit of dignity realized collectively, underscores its connection with experiences of solitude and isolation (see also Chapter 8). Through their collective action, the participants address their condition of isolation and solitude inherent to their perceived undignified circumstances. By seeking dignity together, they also challenge their individual experiences of solitude. This sentiment has been echoed by numerous participants in various ways. For instance, Julien, another Marcher I met on the road a few weeks prior, articulated a similar sentiment:

> It's not just the struggle to make ends meet, it's about not being alone and being seen, being heard, and not just surviving but living a life where you feel valued and not isolated (Interview 5).

This collective yearning for dignity is a response to a multidimensional condition that often overlooks the individual, reducing one's worth to their economic output or socio-spatial status. Simone, who became an impromptu leader during the March of the Forgotten, further illustrates this point:

> Us marching, our presence on roundabouts, it's a statement. We're not invisible, not silent. Our dignity has a voice, and together, it's louder than ever (Interview 6).

Through these claims, the various participants articulate a common desire for a society where dignity is not a privilege but a right afforded to all, regardless of social status and spatial location, challenging narratives that diminish their struggles to economic discontent (cf. Abdelal, 2020). Such demand, as represented by Gabi, Julien, Simone, and countless others, becomes a powerful platform for formulating and expressing their discontent. This perspective significantly aligns with Abdelal's (2020) argument that the denial of dignity and the exacerbation of inequality can serve as catalysts for populist backlashes, as individuals strive to reclaim their sense of worth and agency.

Gabi's perspective, mirrored by her fellow Yellow Vests, encapsulates this sentiment, suggesting that the Yellow Vests' demands are rooted in quests for a dignity, which they feel has been eroded by societal and economic forces. Although the Yellow Vests' demands are based on economic elements (i.e. lower taxes on fuel, lower prices for everyday products, higher pensions), Gabi emphasizes the personal and collective aspect of her group's cause:

> On the roundabouts, every person comes to find help, especially moral support, to find someone who listens to them. We come to find help and advice from people who are going through the same thing. It's about finding an exchange, about countering solitude in the crowd, and about regaining dignity (Interview 18).

Her articulation highlights the importance of recognizing their struggle as a pursuit of human dignity and solidarity (cf. Abdelal, 2020). Furthermore, this perspective is not confined to Gabi alone; for example, it finds resonance in the official press release of the March of the Forgotten (Document, 2021e; see Chapter 7) and is voiced by other participants. Their collective outcry for dignity, is a response to what they perceive as a profound injustice – living without the basic rights and respect they believe should be accorded to all citizens regardless of where they live. This understanding of dignity extends beyond basic material needs and encompasses social recognition, access to space, and symbolic power.

This exemplifies Fukuyama (2018) and Abdelal's (2020; see also Chapter 7) emphases on recognition, which encompass both material and symbolic dimensions, as a key component to understand experiences of inequality. As I argue in this thesis, this is also instrumental in uncovering the underlying causes of the growing surge in social discontent observed in France and, arguably, in other Western regions labelled as "places that don't matter" (see Section 1.2). This understanding of dignity contrasts with Jacques' more pragmatic approach, which

reduces a dignified life to material possessions – such as a car, a house and a sufficient pension.

Such contrast also reflects a generational gap between Gabi and her father (cf. Prasad, 1992). Jacques grew up in an era where social and economic mobility were limited, and the emphasis was placed on hard work and making ends meet. Gabi, on the other hand, belongs to a generation that values personal fulfilment, self-expression, and social justice. She perceives her involvement within the Yellow Vests as an opportunity to claim a "dignified life." Besides, the individual and collective dimension is an important aspect when comparing these divergences. Jacques values individual achievement because he had to fend for himself, and he sees his success as a result of his own hard work and perseverance. On the other hand, Gabi sees the importance of collective action and community support. She emphasizes the importance of finding help and advice from people with the same experience. For her, as for others like Joseph or Bertrand (see Chapter 7 & 8), it's about countering their experienced solitude and regaining dignity collectively. Their focus is on achieving dignity and recognition as a group, rather than as individuals.

Furthermore, Gabi's rejection of "the way things are" and her demand for a dignified life extend to spatial dimensions. Compared to her father who evolved and seemingly remains rooted in the rurality of his environment, Gabi seems to be more strongly affected by the peri-urbanisation of her surroundings. This may have placed her in a position of greater exposure to the challenges that come with peri-urban living and its struggles, shaping her commitment for social and spatial justice. For instance, she has experienced the encroachment of urbanisation on her rural landscape, with the once picturesque countryside giving way to concrete structures and commercial developments. The conversion of the peri-urban periphery into a hub of economic and commercial activities, while providing conveniences, has also brought forth issues such as increased traffic congestion, environmental degradation, and the standardization of spaces, as reflected in the presence of homogenous shopping centres and retail chains that diminish local distinctions (see Chapter 8). These spatial transformations have significant consequences for the social dynamics and quality of life in peri-urban areas. In Gabi's case, her exposure to the impacts of peri-urbanisation may have given her a more acute awareness of the challenges faced by those living in these evolving spaces and incentivised her commitment within the Yellow Vests protests.

Overall, the contrast between Jacques and Gabi's perspectives further suggests the dialectics between their socio-spatial context and their values. Gabi's commitment

as a Yellow Vest, her demand for recognition and dignity, and her emphasis on collective action and community support to counteract the isolation produced by living in the peri-urban, all can be tied to response to the challenges of the peri-urban condition. Her experiences in a changing landscape, distinct from her father's, have spurred her to transform her immediate surroundings and her own lived reality.

Refusing to resign themselves to a life marked by "that's just the way it is," Gabi and her group of Yellow Vests collectively question the socio-economic, spatial, and symbolic barriers that structure their lives. Shaped by their peri-urban socio-spatial context, their demand for recognition and dignity operates through their collective encounter, expressing agency to challenge dominant power structures (see Chapter 3 & 4; Merrifield, 2013). To challenge such a life and create another, this agency is enacted in the Cabin, which I will address next.

The Cabin, brave new world

The Cabin is where Gabi and her group organize and create their own politics and transform their lived experiences. As Gabi says,

> The Cabin is where everything happens. It's our brave new world. It's our centre, it's our new *cité*. (Interview 18).

Gabi's use of the term *cité* is significant, as it harks back to the classical Greek concept of *polis* (see Sakellariou, 2010*)*. This term in French implies more than a city-state; it commonly suggests a dynamic community where individuals participate in shared governance and decision-making, forging a sense of identity and belonging. Gabi's application of this term to the Cabin reflects her perception of it as not just a physical structure but a socio-political space where their collective aspirations take form. Just as the *polis* was a locus of civic engagement, the Cabin constitutes their modern-day *cité*, an arena where people collectively shape their destiny, challenge the status quo, and foster a new sense of community and identity.

Initially, the Cabin was a simple structure erected on the roundabout occupied by Gabi and the others. As their occupation persisted over the weeks, they built a shelter to protect themselves from the elements and sustain their occupation over time. Built from wooden pallets and plastic tarps, it served as a refuge for protecting provisions, resting, and ultimately "hold the roundabout," as Virgile says (Interview 11). The construction of such cabins was not exclusive to Gabi's

group; it was a widespread practice which helped to organise and enable the protests to last over time across France (Figure 9.2; Section 1.1; see Bonin & Liochon, 2022; Susser, 2022).

On the roundabout, the Cabin further met the needs for a physical space to gather and materialize encounters. As Virgile puts it:

> It was the key place of our action and reflection. It was our space, where we could create something that belongs to us, something different (Interview 11).

Although cabins on nearby roundabouts were quickly destroyed by the authorities, theirs relocated and persisted.

Figure 9.2
A cabin on the Europe roundabout occupied by Yellow Vests. Source: author.

Figure 9.3
The Cabin on Gabi's farmland on the outskirts of Springfield. Source: author.

Virgile continues:

> We had to save our Cabin, to protect our new world, and to become what we want to be, and no longer be what we are, we had to find a solution (Interview 11).

They found the solution at Gabi's, on one of the vacant fields on the edge of her farm. Today, the Cabin hardly resembles the roundabout shelter it once was, but rather a place of everyday life.

Originally built from makeshift pallets, the Cabin now resembles a small house made from large wooden slats, with a corrugated iron roof and real windows salvaged from a landfill site. Although built from scraps, it reflects an effort of construction that made this space habitable over time (Figure 9.3). Despite its hodgepodge somewhat disorderly appearance, the Cabin nevertheless serves as a space that can host the community's activities.

The interior is surprisingly spacious and can easily accommodate a dozen of people around a large table adorned with mismatched chairs (Figure 9.4). The adjacent room serves as a lounge with two old leather armchairs and a couch covered with a holed floral sheet. All the furniture is second-hand, salvaged from the landfill or donated by group members and supporters.

Figure 9.4
Inside the Cabin, hanging yellow vests on the walls, Nanou managing the interior. Source: author.

In these two rooms, the dominant colour is yellow, reminding every visitor they are with the Yellow Vests, and if they are here, it's because they belong or have been invited. Adorning the walls of the living room are a range of hand-drawn posters bearing the various slogans of the movement, including "We are here!", "All together!" and "Dignity for all."

There is also the flag of the March of the Forgotten, brought back and prominently displayed by Gabi as a tribute to their experience and commitment to revive and continue the protests. In the dining room, several vests bearing designs and slogans are hanging on the walls, displayed like trophies and memorabilia of a foundational past. Showing me the vests, Zach tells me:

> I wore that one on the first day I went to our roundabout, almost three years ago. It's old and dirty. Now I wear a different one. But that one is the original, the one that changed everything (Interview 20).

Zach is known as the "keeper of the Cabin," and with good reason. Responsible for its construction and maintenance, he spends most days there. A retired industrial worker, Zach is a jack-of-all-trades. He fixes the roof when it leaks,

designed the outdoor shower, installed the rainwater harvesting tank (Figure 9.5), and dug the garden at the back. Despite his years of hard work and physical damage due to a factory accident, he works tirelessly all day. He always has a tool in his hand and something to do. But he also knows when to take breaks and opens a beer from time to time.

Taking care of the Cabin is the best opportunity for him to get out of his small rent-controlled apartment, be physically active, and be among his friends. While staring at the insulation on the wall, he says:

> If I didn't have the Cabin, I'd already be old, be one of those retirees who's bored to death, slouched in front of the TV and condemned to my solitude. Here, I see my friends, and I have something to do, something to build (Interview 20).

Figure 9.5
The rainwater collection tank at the back of the Cabin, an installation handmade by Zach. Source: author.

Figure 9.6
The Cabin bedroom, for the occasional nap, and also Momo currently sleeps. Source: author.

Zach is proud of his achievements and shows me in detail all the innovations he has brought to the building. For example, thanks to the rainwater harvesting tank, they can water the garden and grow vegetables.

He also had the idea of adding an old broken-down caravan to the Cabin, which now serves as a bedroom and kitchen (Figures 9.6 & 9.7). Over time, the building has become a place of life where everyday needs can be met. Momo, for example, has been living there for a few days. He met Gabi and the group during the March of the Forgotten, and he came to live here, help her on the farm and be part of the community. He seemingly sleeps, washes, and eats there comfortably.

Sometimes, Zach also comes to rest there, with Nanou, with whom he is now in a relationship. The two single retirees met at the roundabout and have been inseparable ever since. Zach confides:

> It's good to find someone in your life and share all of this together (Interview 20).

Figure 9.7
The Cabin kitchen, with all the necessities to sustain daily needs. Source: author.

Zach and Nanou are not the only couple who met on the roundabout. Pat and Céline also met there; and they celebrated their engagement last year, with Pat proposing to Céline in front of their friends. Pat wanted to propose where it all began, at the Cabin. Although it was no longer on the roundabout, it still represented the place of their encounter, which, according to Pat, could never have happened otherwise or elsewhere. Before meeting, Pat, a municipal employee, and Céline, a caretaker to disabled children, did not frequent the same places, living on opposite sides of the outskirts of Springfield. Although living only a few kilometres apart, they were separated by the city where neither of them would go, for the same reasons as the rest of the group.

Pat tells me:

> It took a roundabout for us to meet, it's crazy (Interview 21).

Céline continues:

> It was the only thing we had in common, a place to meet, a roundabout and a cabin on top (Interview 21).

I feel Pat becoming emotional. He seems happy and somewhat relieved. He has been through a lot. After years as a welder, he had to reinvent himself after his sudden layoff plunged him into depression:

> If I hadn't met Céline two years ago, I would have been lost in life. If by any chance I hadn't come to the roundabout that day, I would be alone, without a cause, without a fight, without friends, and without a partner (Interview 21).

Pat and Céline often meet with the group at the Cabin where they enjoy their days off. Moreover, the wedding is approaching, and preparations need to be made. After the civil ceremony, they plan to have a 'yellow' reception at the Cabin to celebrate their union. And everyone pitches in: Zach needs to fix the roof first, and he will help build the temporary tent to accommodate guests outside; Nanou will take care of the buffet, and Virgile will do whatever he is asked to do, always ready to participate in Cabin activities (Figure 9.8).

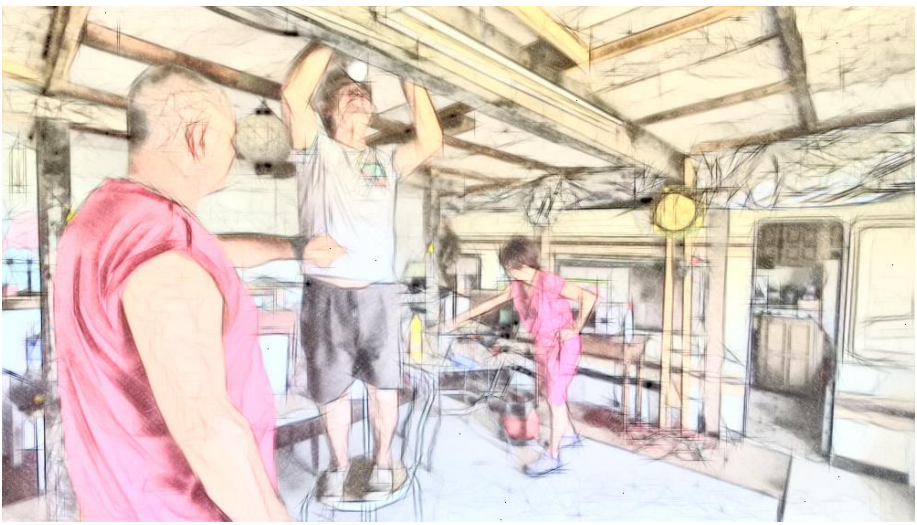


Figure 9.8
In preparation of the incoming wedding, Zach and Virgile are fixing the Cabin roof from leaks, while Nanou prepares some snack for tasting. Source: author.

Virgile, too, spends his weekends there. He enjoys spending time with Nanou and the others, telling them about his day and his small daily problems. For Virgile, the Cabin has become an important place in his life:

> It's a powerful place, a place where we gather, where we feel good, where we feel at home (Interview 16).

For him, it is a place where he has succeeded in "building a family" made up of solid relationships and mutual recognition:

> These are people we can call at any time, and vice versa. And that's just unique; that's what makes me feel happy, finally! (Interview 16).

If Zach is the guardian of the Cabin, Nanou is its caretaker. She is the one who offers newcomers a beer or coffee to drink. She takes inventory of provisions and notes what needs to be restocked. She also manages the common purse to which all members of the group contribute each month according to their means. She also organizes activities and assigns tasks if necessary: painting a banner, sewing vests, clearing the table, preparing Saturday lunch.

Even though Nanou feels at home in her small apartment in the neighbouring village, she likes to come to the Cabin to "build a world together" as she puts it (Fieldwork Journal, June 2021). As a mother and grandmother, she also embraces this role at the Cabin where she enjoys taking care of her friends, pampering them, and sharing "family" moments. This also allows her to help Gabi, who is very busy at the farm. Nanou comes almost every day to see Gabi for a coffee and moral support. She also helps her sometimes when it's necessary to clean the barn or horse boxes (Figure 9.9).

After her day, Gabi comes to the Cabin to join her friends. This is where she can relax and unwind before going home to cook dinner for her father. This is where she shares her worries and difficulties, and where she can find moral support and help. Even her father Jacques visits the Cabin from time to time, despite his doubts about the Yellow Vests. The Cabin being only a few hundred meters from the house, he can access it easily when his legs allow him. This enables him to break the solitude of his day and be among other people, even if he rarely participates in conversations. However, he sometimes talks to Zach who also helps with farm tasks: repairing a tractor, unclogging a sink, etc.

Figure 9.9
Nanou helping Gabi to clean the barn before storing the incoming hay bales for winter.
Source: author.

In addition to the Cabin, Zach participates in farm activities and helps Gabi keep it running by repairing hoses, insulating stables, etc. Beyond his solidarity, it is a way for Zach to repay Gabi and thank her for allowing the relocation of the Cabin, and thus allowing their community to come together and endure. Still, Gabi always insists:

> This is not my place, it's ours! (Interview 15).

The narrative above illuminates the transformative potential of the Cabin as space of encounter, as described by Merrifield (2013) and expanded upon by Leitner (2012) and Simonsen & Koefoed (2020; see Chapter 4). The Cabin's evolution from a simple physical structure to a space rich in personal and communal significance is evident through the stories and relationships that thrive within its walls. This transformation goes beyond physical changes and embodies an

interplay of social, cultural, and emotional facets. These changes result directly from the interactions, relationships, and experiences that unfold in and around this space. As space of encounter, the Cabin becomes the conduit through which participants cultivate a sense of shared identity and belonging within the community.

As a result, the Cabin transcends its physicality, morphing into a space of refuge, communal support, and shared experiences, providing a platform for participants to appropriate themselves roles and statuses within the community. The Cabin's emergence as a space of encounter is not solely rooted in individual experiences, but rather emerges from the collective encounters among participants. This process resonates with Merrifield's (2013) concept of the "politics of encounter," emphasising the formative nature of shared interactions, and further echoing the critical phenomenological understanding of space as continually produced through intersecting social relations and lived experiences (Section 4.3). Such perspective is relevant here, casting the Cabin as a relational space where social relations shape and are shaped by its utilization and the involved experiences. The interplay of relationships within the Cabin contributes to the transformation of space, fostering solidarity among participants, and ultimately a sense of community and belonging that counteracts their previous experiences of solitude and marginalisation (Section 3.3).

In sum, the Cabin is a space that emerges through both individual and collective experiences, and their agency. The relational dynamics forged within it are integral to its transformative potential, moulding it into a space that transcends its physical attributes. The relationships facilitated by encounters through social interactions and power struggles generate a profound sense of community and belonging intrinsic to the Cabin and its "politics of encounter." This analysis underscores the dynamic and ever-evolving nature of space, one that can be harnessed and transformed through the politics inherent in participants' encounters and their experiences.

An encounter to become something

Through the Cabin, a transformation occurs. One that fosters community and solidarity, both vehicles of a "dignified life," as they counteract experiences of indignity and isolation felt collectively by its occupants on a daily basis. Central to this discussion is the notion of transformation, which plays a pivotal role in understanding how the Cabin facilitates these processes. Drawing on the conceptual framework in Chapter 4, I have explored the various challenges of peri-

urban life. These challenges are tied to the standardization of spaces, and the homogenization of experiences and isolation (see Chapter 8). Such challenges often lead to the erosion of individual agency, the deletion of encounters and spontaneous and creative use of space.

In this context, the need for meaningful relationships that nurture a sense of community becomes increasingly evident. The Cabin fulfils a vital role by facilitating these relationships, fostering solidarity to develop and to endure over time, and creating the conditions for them to evolve and metamorphose into something new. This transformation goes beyond mere interaction; it leads to the creation of a new world within the Cabin, which subsequently acts as a catalyst for the emergence of new everyday politics aimed at addressing the contested aspects of peri-urban life. In the remainder of this chapter, I address empirically the nature of this transformation and its various political elements processed in and through the Cabin. This transformation significantly alters the participants' experience of the peri-urban, reshaping their perception of reality on multiple levels. The Cabin evolves as a space of transformation made possible, a utopia made achievable in its imperfections and paradoxes.

Throughout my fieldwork, one of the main challenges I faced was trying to understand what the participants were trying to achieve through the Cabin. When I asked questions like "what kind of new world are you building together?" and "what do you aspire to in it?", I often found myself faced with perplexed and circumventing responses. Many participants responded with abstract ideas and concepts, such as "we want humanity," "a new world," "balance" or "justice," sketching a utopian-like vision of a place made of universal equality, free of any constraints emanating from "them," "money," "greed," etc. These answers could be summarised by Gabi who replied:

> It's complicated to put into words. It's complex in my head, and I'm trying to put words to it. Like you know… You know what I mean? (Interview 9).

I understand what Gabi meant, and it is this complexity that I seek to address. To interpret what the participants were aspiring to achieve through their encounter in the Cabin, we can take our point of departure in a reflection by Bertrand, the literature lecturer I met during the March who joined the group in Springfield. Bertrand articulated a thought-provoking connection by suggesting that the group's aspirations might be rooted in French history, specifically drawing from the renowned formulation of Abbé Sieyès (1789). This formulation, originally published in a pamphlet at the onset of the events that marked the French

Revolution, offers insight into the ideals that underpin the participants' actions and experiences. Sieyès wrote:

> *Qu'est-ce que le tiers état ? – Tout. Qu'a-t-il été jusqu'à présent ? – Rien. Que demande-t-il ? – À être quelque chose.*
>
> What is the Third Estate? - Everything. What has it been until now? - Nothing. What does it ask? - To be something.[5] (Sieyès, 1789, p.1)

"To be something" encapsulates the desire of the Third Estate, the commoners who were excluded from political power in pre-revolutionary France, to be recognised and to have a voice in the political system. In this context, it meant to have political power and influence, to be recognised as equal members of society and to be able to participate in decision-making processes. Like the revolutionaries of 1789, the participants, who often identify themselves as modern *sans-culottes*,[6] aspire in their protest and encounter "to be something." And it is no coincidence that a banner in the Cabin proudly displays the slogan of the revolutionaries, which has since become the motto of the French Republic: "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity."

Mirroring the Third Estate's desire to be recognized and given a voice in the political system, the participants aspire to create a new world, to have a sense of belonging, solidarity, and community that they feel is lacking in their current socio-spatial peri-urban reality. Like the Third Estate, the participants feel excluded and marginalized, and they seek through the Cabin and to establish a space where they can materialize their own aspirations. In other words, the Cabin represents a physical manifestation of this desire to "matter," to be recognized and given a voice. It is a space where the participants come together to build and create, to express their hopes and aspirations, and to challenge the existing social and political structures. In this sense, the Cabin serves as a site of resistance and

[5] Constituted by commoners who lacked political power and privileges held by the nobility and clergy, the Third Estate declared itself the National Assembly and demanded equal representation. Sieyès' quote symbolises their quest for political recognition, which ultimately led to the abolition of feudal privileges and adoption of a new constitution.

[6] The "sans-culottes," a faction within the Third Estate, played a significant role in key events such as the storming of the Bastille and Terror. They remain a symbol of the struggle for social justice and the rights of the working class during this tumultuous period in French history.

experimentation in the creation of a more equitable and just society (cf. Cresswell, 1996).

In this way, the Cabin emerges as a political space devoted to the achievement of "being something." Specifically, it is where one becomes something, rather than simply existing as one is. It is a site of an active realisation of the participants' identity, who come here not to be what they are individually, but to become something else, and becoming so collectively. At the Cabin, they come because they are Yellow Vests, and a member of a community dedicated to building another world, and to experience life differently. In other words, the Cabin emerges as a platform where space and experiences are dynamic and driven by struggle, agency, and political aspiration.

Figure 9.10
Outside of the Cabin, which sign on its façade indicates why we are here: "we don't give up!"
Source: author.

This is illustrated, for instance, by the prominent sign displayed on the Cabin's facade, boldly stating, "we don't give up!" alongside a yellow vest (Figure 9.10). Inside and out, the Cabin serves as a gathering space dedicated to a specific cause: to protest, to build another world, to give it a voice and make it visible. This function is also evident in the various activities that take place in the Cabin, ranging from the creation of banners and other visual signs to be hung in public places, to group meetings organizing collective "actions."

This Saturday, a so-called "action" is under way. The task is to finally create the banner that Nanou, Zach, and Pat absolutely want to hang on one of the highway bridges on the outskirts of Springfield. Although street protests and roundabout occupations no longer take place, the group continues to organize activities at the Cabin every Saturday as a symbol of their continued commitment to their cause. These also provide an opportunity for participants to come together, spend time with each other, share stories of their week, and discuss their daily struggles.

For the banner, Pat brought a large roll of dark red canvas that he retrieved from the town hall where he works, and Nanou bought a large can of yellow paint with money from the common purse. It's time to start painting. Zach, Nanou, Pat, Céline, Momo, and Bertrand unroll the 6-meter-long canvas and decide on the message to paint. "We're still here!" Zach proposes. "No, we need a message that speaks to everyone, that speaks to the people," Nanou says. The rest of the group agrees. "And why not 'Power to the People'?" suggests Bertrand, timidly. A silence settles in as they reflect. "Yeah, that's good, 'Power to the People' Bertrand, it's smart," Nanou responds. "It means everything, the people are everyone, it's us, the forgotten ones" (Interview 22).

The group agrees. They are glad that Bertrand has joined them. "We need everyone here, especially people who can help us be heard clearly and legitimately," says one (Interview 22). Most of them are workers with no higher education, and the group is always seeking involvement from people who can contribute to their reflections and help formulate their grievances. Bertrand's suggestion is seen as intelligent and widely applicable, able to speak to the concerns of all those who feel marginalized, and it further highlights the group's desire for recognition. The group's reliance on more educated and knowledgeable individuals like Bertrand is also significant. They view his input as valuable and essential to the success of their cause, recognizing the importance of intellectual support and expertise in formulating their message – echoing with the value of internal diversification in social movements and organised protests (cf. Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011; Ganz, 2009).

Figure 9.11
Painting the banner outside the Cabin, a collective and gathering activity. Source: author.

Throughout the fieldwork, I noted this search for legitimacy among the participants, who felt belittled because of their life experiences and lower education compared to metropolitan "elites." Céline tells me, dismayed by the out-of-touch nature of politicians' speeches:

> It's not because we haven't had higher education that we don't know what our life is like, we're the ones living it. It's up to them to come down to our level and try to understand what we are experiencing, not the other way around. (Interview 15).

Once everyone agrees, they get to work (Figure 9.11). Pat outlines the letters in pencil with a wooden board. Nanou, Céline, Momo, and Bertrand paint them yellow. It will take the group over an hour to complete the banner, accompanied by singing and jokes. Meanwhile, Zach, as always, takes care of the barbecue right next to them. On the menu, there are sausages, whose scent attracts Gabi's German shepherds. Zach needs to cook a lot. Because today, more people are expected at the Cabin.

From Utopia to Agora

This Saturday at the Cabin is special. The group is expecting the arrival of other members of Yellow Vest collectives from the region and beyond to form what is called the *New Agoras*. This activity was initiated by Gabi, who suggested hosting the gathering at the Cabin. While waiting for the guests to arrive, the group gathers around the outdoor table, some opening a beer, others nibbling on chips and biscuits.

Bertrand seems happy to be here. As representative of the Caravan of the People, he is eager to discuss with other Yellow Vests and perhaps integrate his collective into the New Agoras. With their caravan, Bertrand and his group travel through the Burgundy region to communicate about political representation, particularly to advocate for the implementation of the *RIC*,[7] the Referendum of Citizen Initiative. This is a constitutional reform proposal that aims to give citizens the power to propose referendums on national issues. Setting up the caravan in the town square, accompanied by popular music, they display educational materials on this constitutional reform and its potential benefits for the people and their political representation (Figure 9.12). At the Cabin, he hopes to communicate this initiative and potentially integrate it into a broader range of actions.

In contrast to Bertrand, the rest of the group seems somewhat perplexed at the idea of creating a new organization, especially with external members. Even though they all call and consider themselves Yellow Vests, there are different factions of roundabouts, and not all are as close or get along as well as one might think. Gabi reassures her group, even though she is aware that discourses and intentions vary from roundabout to roundabout. She knows the coming guests are known to have greater political aspirations for the movement.

Among the Cabin's group, I note a certain paradox: even though they gather as Yellow Vests, any organisational aspirations and formulation of concrete political agenda are quickly terminated by deep mistrust. Supported by his comrades, Pat exclaims: "What's the point of politics, of parties, they're all corrupt!" (Interview 15).

[7] The *Référendum d'initiative citoyenne* (RIC) was one of the key demands of the Yellow Vest movement, as it represented a means to enhance citizen participation in decision-making and reduce the influence of political parties and lobbyists. The debate over the RIC is ongoing in France, with some arguing that it would lead to populism and undermine the representative democracy, while others see it as a way to renew democracy and give more power to the people.

Figure 9.12
The Caravan of the People makes a stop on a town square during the March of the Forgotten, proudly waving their flag, and avocating for the RIC initiative. Source: author.

Within the group, there is a deep rejection of what they label "politics" – institutions and policy-makers, who are perceived to share a common trait of being out of touch with the daily reality of the "people." This corrupt political system, argues Gabi, should be replaced by the establishment of:

> A political life organized according to the daily life of people, [led by] people who have their feet on the ground, who know the cost of bread, and what it's like to be alone and forgotten (Interview 15).

"Yes, but..." each of them would reply, whenever the question of the "how and why" of politics is raised. How do we achieve this ideal, to organize this new world and make it achievable? Gabi answers:

> Well, that's up to them. It's up to the representatives of the people to take charge. But they don't do it. They betray us. That's why we don't like politics and we don't want it (Interview 15).

The paradox seems irreparable. At the Cabin, they want change while simultaneously rejecting any formulation and implementation of political reform. They want legitimate representatives to legitimize change, yet they also refuse to vote, assuming that elections are rigged. These different themes constituted most of the political conversations I witnessed at the Cabin and more generally during my fieldwork. These aspirations seem difficult to achieve and cancel themselves out. They want a transformation, but they believe that others should take charge of it; not out of laziness, but more out of a sense of powerlessness: "we are the little ones," Pat says, "and little we are" (Interview 15). This new world is therefore limited before it is even completed. From its discourse to its practice, it is stopped by its own contradictions, thus finding itself enclosed in its own utopia, unable to exist outside the walls of the Cabin.

Yet, the Cabin's group is convinced by Gabi. As the various guests gradually arrive at the Cabin, the assembly sets up in a circle sitting on plastic chairs. Everyone is present, and the meeting can begin. After a short introduction by each person, Pierre introduces himself as the Vice President of the national committee for the New Agoras and proceeds to explain the project to the group. He declares:

> Here we are gathered, as enlightened citizens, to create the first citizen New Agora in France (Interview 23; Figure 9.13).

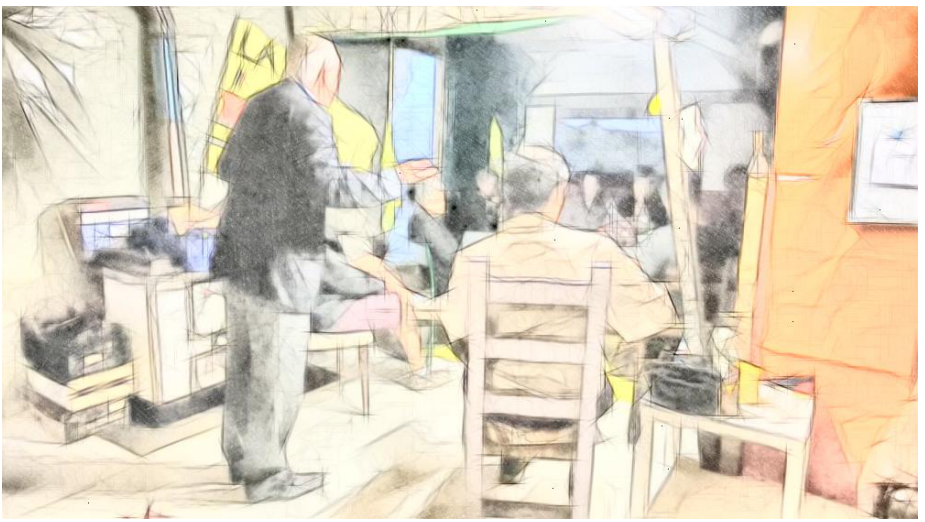


Figure 9.13
Presenting the "New Agoras" initiative at the Cabin. Source: author.

In contrast to the rest of the attendees, Pierre comes from the Parisian region. He embodies a more "urban" identity, speaking with a Parisian accent and wearing a suit and polished shoes. He looks like he came straight out of an office or institution, and his appearance stands out sharply from that of the other participants gathered at the Cabin.

Standing at the edge of the circle, he delivers a somewhat technical discourse on the organizational functioning of the New Agoras, which he presents as an antagonistic and parallel political representation system operating a more direct democracy. As indicated in the Manifesto of the New Agoras, this new system to be built would consist of a:

> Citizen collective favourable to dialogue, to allow French citizens to participate in the establishment of constructive reforms for France

The system would be constituted of different regional "Agoras," which would elect regional, and national representatives to communicate the demands and aspirations of the "*Agoréens*," described as "responsible citizens" and endowed with "empathy" and "brotherhood" (Document, 2021a).

Pierre came to the Cabin tonight to promote the project and convince Gabi and her group to join in by establishing the "first citizen New Agora in France."

He argues:

> Who better than you can know what you are living where you live? No one. Your life, your aspirations, and your struggles will be highlighted and represented by yourselves, those who know what you are living (Interview 23).

The group nods in agreement. But as the technical and procedural presentation progresses, I note Pierre gradually losing the attention of his audience. He concludes by announcing the ambition of presenting New Agoras in the primaries of the upcoming presidential elections by reading the manifesto of what appears to be, between the lines, the creation of a party (Document 2021c).

At this point, Gabi interrupts Pierre, apologizing, to which he responds, "Please, it is your home." However, Gabi clarifies,

> The Cabin is not mine, here, it is ours. (Interview 23)

She continues:

> Today I was heading to a meeting to exchange ideas. The stories about primaries and manifestos are too political for me. I'm not interested. For me, it's all about acting together. Once it becomes political, I lose interest. The votes are rigged. Above, everything it? is rigged. What's the point of having representation for the *Agoréens* if it will never pass? (Interview 23).

The Cabin companions nod in agreement. Pat adds:

> What we want is the good of the people, for leaders who love the people and understand what we're going through (Interview 23).

The rejection of "politics" surfaces again.

Pierre tries to calm the audience by emphasizing the need for organization and structure in their actions. According to him, the New Agoras model provides a reference point for organizing this new desired life, materializing their aspirations for a more just system and finally addressing their grievances. Pierre says:

> The New Agora, it's you. It's up to you to create it here in the Cabin, to build a new world together and give it life (Interview 23).

Gabi's group appears a bit calmer, and even more reassured after Bertrand, more enthusiastic, speaks up and tries to adjust the technical discourse to the aspirations of his comrades:

> It's normal to be suspicious. People are afraid today; they are so alone. Like we were alone before. And we don't know who to turn to. But now we have each other. And it's a golden opportunity to try something on our own, and finally give life to our encounter, don't you think? (Interview 23).

Applauses erupt in response. Zach, Nanou, Pat, Céline join the others in assembly in their enthusiasm for the project. Pierre appears relieved and does not waste a second to start the ceremony for the creation of this first New Agora. Pierre has prepared a declaration that everyone can repeat.

In the Cabin, then, the participants solemnly declare the New Agora reading out the declaration from the Manifesto (Figure 9.14):

> We, all voluntary and responsible citizens, officially and solemnly establish today, the implementation of semi-direct and permanent democracy in all territories of our homeland, our nation, France. With the citizen Agoras of France and the RIC, and through a modification of Articles 3, 11, and 89 of our constitution. The citizen Agoras of France are the backbone, the breath, and the fire of collective intelligence in service of our destiny for the common good with common sense. With the citizen Agoras of France, all peoples of France, voluntary and responsible, take their destiny into their own hands with wisdom and love. We, all citizens, voluntary and responsible, declare today, here in the Cabin, the creation of the first Agora in France. To assert our rights. Long live the Republic, Long live France (Document, 2021a).

It's done! The New Agora is created! We've gone full circle. The new world is declared, the transformation has become concrete. Everyone stands up and applauds. We hug each other and embrace. Today, it's a victory. Gabi exclaims:

> We're marking history! It may not seem like a big deal in a small cabin like this. But it's serious and meaningful. We're marking history like never before, since humans have been on this planet. We're cold, we're small. But tonight, we're big and as one (Interview 25).

In this small building at the back of a field in the peri-urban outskirts of Springfield, an encounter is realized, despite its paradoxes and contradictions. On this spring Saturday, the Cabin becomes a place that matters.

The participants have seemed to materialise a different perspective on life, a new world where they feel they matter, where each finds a role and recognition among their peers. As Bertrand puts it so well, this Cabin, for them, it is the final stage of their journey where:

> In the end, we put on those yellow vests to be seen; but what we found was that we allowed ourselves to encounter each other, to find each other and to build a new life. It's a revolution (Interview 25).

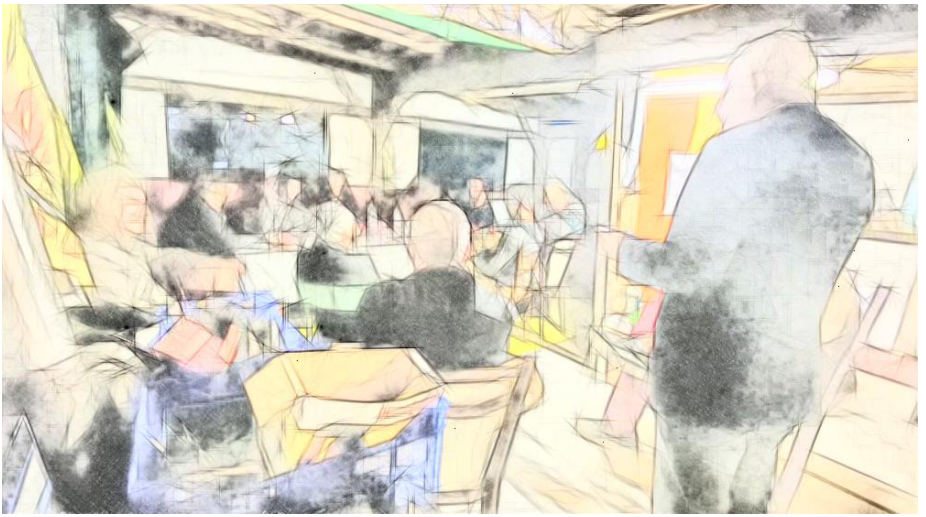


Figure 9.14
Creating the first New Agora in the Cabin, a solemn moment. Source: author.

Transforming peri-urban life: the power of an encounter

The narrative of the Cabin and the creation of the New Agora illustrates the transformative power of the participants' encounters. Despite their diverse backgrounds, they converge and unite into a collective experience characterized by belonging, solidarity, and shared identity. The Cabin embodies a space where individuals have found solace, companionship, and a sense of purpose within the community. Additionally, it serves as a platform for harnessing their collective politics of encounter (Section 4.3) to effect meaningful change in their community, both in their everyday lives and beyond.

From a roundabout shelter to a space of encounter, the Cabin engenders belonging, new lived experiences, solidarities, and politics. This transformative process is deeply intertwined with the themes and concepts explored in Chapter 4, particularly the role of spaces of encounter in shaping collective action and the reimagining of politics and lived experience (see Section 4.3). Additionally, the Cabin offers a platform for the creation of the New Agora, a culmination of the participants' political awakening emerging from their encounter (cf. Merrifield,

2013). The political realisation is made possible through the process of building, negotiating, acting, and discussing within the Cabin, allowing its occupants to feel recognised, belonging to a community, and give themselves agency in their everyday lives and common practices. Nevertheless, the tension between the participants' yearning for change and their distrust of traditional political channels, underscores the limitations in translating encounters into overarching structural change (cf. Leitner, 2012; Simonsen & Koefoed, 2020; see Section 4.3). This illustrates the intricate balance between intimate personal interactions and the intricacies of larger political systems, bordering the participants' politics of encounter of the Cabin to the realm of the everyday.

These limitations should not be seen as neither regressive nor negative. Spatially, the Cabin as space of encounter still exemplifies forceful everyday politics, where participants challenge and negotiate their lived peri-urban experiences, namely a life of isolation and devoid of meaningful encounters, social connections, and solidarity. Through the participants' collective endeavours, the Cabin mutates into a socially and politically charged locus where solidarity and belonging flourish, mirroring a profound reshaping of the participants' perceptions and experiences. Contestation and transformation are enacted through these everyday acts and politics of solidarity, which transcend symbolic gestures and become significant for participant's nascent sense of belonging and community. In realising their encounter within the Cabin, participants transform and become agents of their experience of the space they live in.

In this sense, the Cabin constitutes an evolving space where the experience of the peri-urban may be negotiated and reshaped by those living it in their everyday politics, reflecting the ongoing negotiation and struggle for agency and recognition contingent to the peri-urban condition. Occurring in the realm of the everyday, political realization unfolds as an ongoing journey rather than as an isolated event (cf. Leitner, 2012; Simonsen & Koefoed, 2020). The Cabin in this way illustrates how the participants' daily encounters can transform their political, socio-spatial, and experiential realities. It highlights the potential for creating new spaces where social connections and politics can emerge from below, and where participants may perceive they can appropriate themselves with reshaping the fabric of their daily lives. The Cabin evolves as a space where politics from below is realised in a dynamic and transformative way, producing a moment of self-empowerment, recognition, and political transformation of the participants.

In sum, the Cabin illustrates the dynamic nature of encounters, which can serve as powerful moments of interactions enabling both experiential and political

transformation in the everyday. While participant may face challenges to catalyse systemic change, the social relations and everyday politics emerging from their encounter remains impactful in the transformation of their experiences and the relationship they entertain with the peri-urban space they live in.

Conclusions

> Can revolutionary upheaval break the boundaries of urban reality?
>
> Sometimes it can.
>
> – Lefebvre (1970/2003, p.125)

In our current "age of discontent" (Rhodes-Purdy et al., 2023), movements like the Yellow Vests in France epitomise grievances rooted in geographical disparities stemming from peripheries where inhabitants claim their lives not to be understood and marginalised. Complementing socio-economic and political perspectives to understand and qualify such *geographies of discontent* (De Ruyter et al., 2021; Dijkstra et al., 2020; MacKinnon et al., 2022; McCann, 2020; McKay et al., 2023; Pike et al., 2023, 2023; Rodrigues Posé et al., 2023), this thesis has inquired into the lived experiences of communities inhabiting the French peri-urban. Focusing on the Yellow Vests, the thesis has analysed dynamics of socio-spatial inequalities and lived experiences that may illuminate broader narratives on "the revenge of places that don't matter" (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). Approaching the peri-urban as lived, the thesis has employed a Lefebvrian-inspired critical phenomenological framework and the concept of encounter to explore the research question:

How is peri-urban life lived, and how is it experienced, contested, and transformed by those living it?

To address this question, this thesis has investigated the lived experiences of peri-urban inhabitants as represented by Yellow Vests protesters. It has sought to shed light on their capacity to contest these experiences and collectively transform their daily lives within the production of the peri-urban space. Through this, the thesis has shown how peri-urban life is intricately characterised by encounters, or the lack thereof, and how they shape both the socio-spatial challenges and agency of its inhabitants in both experiencing, contesting, and transforming peri-urban life (Figure 10).

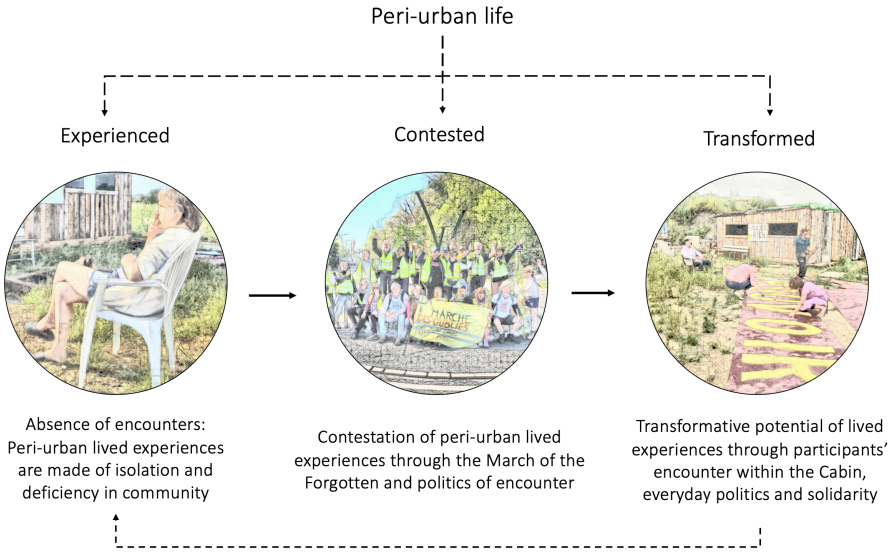


Figure 10.
Exploring peri-urban life and how it is experienced, contested, and transformed by those living it through encounters – a summary. Source: author

The convergence of spatial marginalisation, economic hardships, and exclusion from urbanisation dividends contributes to a pervasive experience of isolation by those inhabiting the peri-urban. In this regard, the thesis offers insights into what it means to live in peri-urban peripheries, inviting a broader experiential inquiry into urbanisation and its multifaceted impacts on people's lives and the discontents this may engender.

In the following, I elaborate on the findings of this thesis, offering a response to the research question through two sets of conclusions.

Living the peri-urban

This thesis firstly illustrates how living in the peri-urban is shaped by an environment where encounters are diminished, personal mobilities constrained, and senses of isolation and marginalisation prevail. The evolution of the peri-urban landscape, driven by economic and urban changes, fosters a homogenised and functionalised landscape that impacts peri-urban inhabitants' daily mobilities and possibilities for social interaction. While physically adjacent to urban

amenities, peri-urban inhabitants find themselves detached from the social hubs that once fostered community connections. This process not only alters the physical landscape but also reshapes the way people connect and relate to their environment and to each other.

A consequence is a perceived loss of opportunities for spontaneous encounters, and a weakening of the social bonds that once defined their communities. The participants may be argued to be denied what Merrifield (2013, p.40-41) terms "centrality" and the opportunity to contribute to the creation of their environment. This deprivation occurs because spaces for encounters and collective agency disappear or are commodified. This limits the inhabitants' sense of belonging and identity, and it contributes to their sense of lacking recognition and political legitimacy. These experiences of isolation and marginalisation intertwine with other significant factors shaping peri-urban life and the participants' quest for a "dignified life," including political disenfranchisement, lack of recognition and material constraints. This peri-urban lived experience becomes a shared condition across age, gender, occupation, and background.

Accordingly, I propose that lived peri-urban experiences in important respects involve an absence of encounters. This isolation is not merely physical but deeply rooted in the social fabric of peri-urban spaces, where traditional community bonds are increasingly displaced by broader socio-economic forces and spatial configurations. Added to economic vulnerability and political marginalisation, living in the peri-urban entails a scarcity of opportunities for meaningful connections while concurrently denying access to those offered by the city. I suggest, therefore, that the absence of meaningful encounters is a critical aspect of peri-urban life, which contributes significantly to a "left-behindness," both spatially, economically, politically, socially, and experientially.

This conclusion adds to our understanding of peri-urban geographies in and beyond France (e.g. Benoit, 2019; Charmes, 2009; 2019; Depraz, 2017; Follmann, 2022; Guilluy, 2014; Sahana et al., 2023; Vanier, 2003). Focusing on daily routines, aspirations, and grievances of peri-urban inhabitants, the thesis provides additional insights on lived experiences in peri-urban spaces. By exploring the lived experiences amidst the complexities of urbanisation and socio-spatial inequalities, this enhances our understanding of the peri-urban as importantly lived. This deepens the discourse on peri-urban spaces but also highlight the need for further explorations of the dynamic interplays between experience and spatial production shaping these areas.

Contesting and Transforming peri-urban reality

Although the peri-urban condition may entail experiences of isolation and marginalisation, it is not fixed nor unchangeable. Indeed, my exploration of peri-urban life suggest compelling counterforces disrupting the production of the peri-urban. While many peri-urban inhabitants experience isolation and socio-political marginalisation, they engage in active processes of contestation. The March of the Forgotten (Chapter 7) and the Cabin (Chapter 9) provided both contesting and transformative platforms, as they enabled embodied encounters that allow participants to engage with and negotiate the challenges they face. These cases demonstrate how encounters can catalyse collective responses, which can serve as rallying points for participants to contest status quo and seek alternative peri-urban lives. These encounters propel the participants to navigate their experienced isolation and to actively participate in the construction of a sense of belonging, solidarity, and community.

The narratives unfolded in this thesis reflect efforts to challenge peri-urban conditions, efforts that became catalysts for transformations of the participants' daily experiences and their relationship with peri-urban space. Their encounters, while limited in scope both tempo-spatially and politically, offer platforms for change involving shifts from isolation to community, from periphery to forms of centrality. It is a transformation that transcends their individual backgrounds and connects them in shared struggles and aspirations through what Merrifield (2013) terms "politics of encounter." Such kind of politics finds expression in the Cabin, which evolves from a roundabout shelter to a space of encounter, negotiation, and empowerment. While the tension between participants' desire for change and their scepticism toward traditional political avenues persists, this politics of encounter remains impactful within the realm of the everyday. The participants' experiences of isolation and their socio-political marginalisation become a canvas upon which they unfolded empowering dynamics of encounters and contestation. This suggests the peri-urban as both a site of struggle and a realm of potentialities, shaping the politics of the everyday as individuals navigate, contest, and ultimately transform their experience and environment to cultivate a sense of belonging and shared agency.

The transformative process witnessed within the Cabin serves as an exemplar of grassroots political engagement "from below" (cf. Amin & Thrift, 2002; Harvey, 2013; Holston, 1998; Koefoed et al., 2017, 2022; Merrifield, 2013; Sitrin & Azzellini, 2014). It illustrates how localized actions have the potential to challenge

the dynamics of urbanisation and processes of economic, socio-spatial, and political marginalisation. This highlights the significance of opportunities to build relationships and social cohesion within peripheries, such as the peri-urban. Bottom-up transformations underscores that individuals themselves possess an intimate understanding of their living conditions and can play an integral role in shaping the environments they inhabit. This also emphasises the powerful impact that encounters, communal spaces, and shared struggles can exert on human behaviour and their relationship (cf. Darling & Wilson, 2016; Faier & Rofel, 2014; Koefoed et al., 2017, 2022; Matejskova & Leitner, 2011; Merrifield, 2013)

The journeys of the participants emerge as narratives of transformation and empowerment. They encapsulate intricate interplays between human agency and spatial production, revealing how encounters and collective actions can disrupt experiences of isolation and marginalisation This can contest prevailing processes of space production, and ultimately cultivate a sense of shared belonging and community. Lefebvre's (1970/2003, p.124) idea that the "urban can be transformed into the drama of the urban" strongly resonates in the peri-urban, too, emphasizing the dynamic relationship between spatial production, human experience, and agency. In my research, encounters among the participants emerges as such form of drama, emphasising that spaces are not just passive settings but rather processes that both shape and, most importantly, are shaped by the experiences and actions of individuals.

To summarise, while the peri-urban experience may be one made of isolation and marginalisation experienced in the everyday, it also offers opportunities for participants to actively contest and transform their own condition by establishing connections, and challenging the limitations they face. From roundabouts to the Cabin, the participants demonstrate how encounters can wield transformative potential in confronting the challenges of the peri-urban life. This accentuates that contesting and transforming the peri-urban condition originates both in shared encounters and collective efforts. The political awakening taking shape within the Cabin illustrates that while achieving systemic change may be difficult, the everyday politics of encounter possesses the capacity for change at the everyday and experiential levels. Paths to transformation may be localised and driven by encounters, but its ripple effects could extend beyond individual lives, fostering wider senses of belonging and agency. This, in turn, offers an understanding of the dynamics of the peri-urban space and the grievances emerging from it. Through this lens, the thesis delved into such socio-political and experientially-rooted grievances, mapping out how experiences of alienation and marginalisation

drive the inhabitants' engagement with their surroundings and inspire their actions to redefine their socio-spatial reality.

* * *

As I conclude this work, I am reminded of a captivating study on adult development by Waldinger & Schultz (2023), which identifies relationships as the key to a fulfilling life. According to them, it is not fame or wealth but the strength of our relationships and shared experiences that contribute to happier and healthier lives. This argument resonates deeply with the narrative of Yellow Vests protesters, who, through their encounters, achieve to build relationships that significantly alter their peri-urban daily lives. These relationships create a new sense of community, imbuing their lives with shared politics, belonging, and collective identity. The power of these relationships in shaping their socio-spatial reality, as well as their ability to contest and transform it, highlight the significant impact of encounters in navigating the challenges of peri-urban life.

"Can revolutionary upheaval break the boundaries of urban reality?" Lefebvre (1970/2003, p.125) once asked. This thesis echoes Lefebvre's response: "sometimes it can," as it suggests potentials for transformative upheavals to disrupt (peri-)urban realities. Analysing the participants' lived realities through the lens encounter, this work delved into the experiential "matter" of peri-urban life, and the agency of those experiencing it to contest and transform this life through active encounters. These encounters become arenas where they may build relationships, collectively assert their identities, articulate their discontents, and craft spaces that reflect theirs needs and articulate their responses to the challenges of the peri-urban condition. Having suggested possibilities for peri-urban life to become a fertile ground for politics of change from below, this thesis also suggests a future at the periphery where inhabitants may assert their agency in the pursuit of a life that matters, challenging dominating narratives of marginality and invisibility in the everyday. As these individuals defy urbanisation's script, advocating for spaces prioritizing people over profit, the peri-urban life transcends its portrayal as a forsaken experience of the left-behind. Instead, it emerges as dynamic and evolving canvas in which individuals are rewriting urban limits and fostering solidarity, politics, and collective identity, transforming the periphery into a space of mattering.

List of figures

List of interviews

Nb	Date	Duration	Format	Location	Participants	Topics
1	04.21	00:22:30	Audio	Europe Roundabout	Cleo, late 50-early 60s, Yellow Vest protester, union representative at her factory.	Yellow Vests engagement/cause, roundabout protest, daily life, women in the movement
2	04.21	00:30:15	Audio	Europe Roundabout	Group interview. Cleo. Participant, male, 60s, retired, former factory worker.	Yellow Vests engagement/cause, employment, labour union, daily life
3	04.21	00:37:20	Audio	Europe Roundabout	Group interview. Two women in their 40s. Street protesters, Yellow Vests and feminist activists.	Women in the movement, climate change, Yellow Vests, being together
4	04.21	00:07:37	Audio	Europe Roundabout	Group interview. The "Yellow Bear." Male in his 50s. Known figure among the Yellow Vests; and other Yellow Vests protesters.	Yellow Vests, political representation, being together, police violence, the people
4b	04.21	00:21:42	Audio	Europe Roundabout	Young male activist, known figure among the Yellow Vests in the South West.	Yellow Vests cause, living in the peri-urban, well-being, dignified life, being together, the people
5	04.21	00:14:42	Video	March of the Forgotten	Group intevriew. Marchers and group of new comers joining the march at a roundabout.	March of the Forgotten, Yellow Vests cause, police violence, contestation, physical effort
6	04.21	01:23:35	Video	March of the Forgotten	Group interview. Group of Marchers during a day of rest.	March of the Forgotten, Yellow Vests cause, daily life, contestation, being together

7	04.21	00:05:03	Video	March of the Forgotten	Joseph, male, 60s, retired, driving a logistics truck on the March of the Forgotten.	Daily life, making ends meet, collecting receipts, Yellow Vests cause, being together
7b	07.21	00:39:20	Audio	Springfield	Joseph, male, 60s, retired, came to Gabi's house for the New Agora.	Daily life, Yellow Vests cause, being together, social marginalisation
8	04.21	00:27:24	Video	March of the Forgotten	Group interview. Group of Marchers during a day of rest, having a drink in a circle.	Daily life, dignified life, solidarity, being together, social marginalisation
9	06.21	03:43:35	Audio	Springfield	Gabi, 50s, Yellow Vest, Marcher, at her farm sitting in the kitchen	Yellow Vests cause, politics, representation, women in the movement, roundabout, daily life, dignified life, history, making ends meet
10	04.21	00:12:57	Video	March of the Forgotten	Francis, 40s, Yellow Vest figure and "influencer"	Yellow Vests cause and movement, street protests, police violence, profile of protesters.
11	06.21	01:45:23	Audio	Springfield	Virgile, 29, Yellow Vest, Marcher	Yellow Vests cause, politics, representation, roundabout, daily life, dignified life, making ends meet, being together
12	06.21	00:52:18	Video	Springfield	Gabi, in her car, doing errands	Daily life, mobility, making ends meet, roundabouts, evolution of daily life space
13	07.21	00:15:36	Video	Springfield	Group interview, at Amir's café with Amir, Nanou and other usual customers	Daily life, making ends meet, evolution of daily life space
14	04.21	00:24:19	Audio	March of the Forgooten	Bertrand, 40s, Yellow Vest Marcher, founded the Caravan of the people, former university lecturer	Yellow Vests cause and movement, daily life, making ends meet, being together, social marginalisation
15	06.21	00:17:22	Video	The Cabin	Group interview at the Cabin with the Yellow Vest group of Springfield	Yellow Vests cause and movement, political representation, demands, dignified life, daily life, the Cabin

16	06.21	00:15:12	Video	Springfield	Group interview, Gabi, Nanou and Virgile, before going out	Being together, roundabout, daily life
17	06.21	00:23:47	Audio	Balto café	Group interview, Gabi, Nanou and Virgile	Daily life, social activities, marginalisation, the Cabin
18	06.21	00:31:55	Audio	Springfield	Jacques and Gabi at the farm	Daily life, past and present, family, Yellow Vests cause and movement, evolution of daily life space
19	06.21	00:09:01	Video	Springfield	Jacques, 90s, retired farmer	Daily life, past and present, family,
20	07.21	00:36:48	Video	The Cabin	Zach, 60s, retired factory worker	The Cabin, Cabin and social activities, personal relationships, daily life, community, identity
21	07.21	00:15:01	Video	The Cabin	Pat, 40s, employee at the town hall	The Cabin, Cabin and social activities, personal relationships, daily life, community, identity
22	07.21	1:02:36	Video	The Cabin	Group interview while preparing the banner	The Cabin, Cabin and social activities, personal relationships, daily life, community, identity
23	07.21	1:21:17	Audio	The Cabin	Group interview, the Cabin group and "guests," introducing the New Agora	New Agoras, political representation, politics, distrust, diversity, Yellow Vests cause
24	07.21	00:10:02	Video	The Cabin	Group interview, the Cabin group and "guests," New Agoras ceremony	New Agoras, political representation, politics, diversity, Yellow Vests cause
25	07.21	00:22:13	Video	The Cabin	Group interview, the Cabin group and "guests," aftermath of the creation of the New Agora	New Agoras, political representation, politics, diversity, distrust

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Mattering at the periphery

Amid rising social discontent in the peripheries of Western European democracies, this thesis offers an exploration of "places that don't matter" through the lens of the French Yellow Vests. Through a Lefebvrian critical phenomenological approach, it presents an ethnographic study of the experiences, challenges, and collective resistance of those living in the shadows of urban prosperity, and whose grievances highlight socio-spatial inequalities. It presents peri-urban life as marked by limited opportunities for encounters and pervasive experiences of isolation. Yet, a narrative of contestation and transfromation emerges as these communities endeavour to reshape their own daily lives through everyday politics and solidarity. Beyond academic scholarship, this thesis attempts to portray some lived realities "from below" often unseen by political narratives. It is an essential read for those seeking deeper understanding of European geographies of discontent and for anyone invested in thinking a future where peripheries matter.

Mathilde Martin's international and inter-disciplinary academic and professional journey has fuelled her interest in contemporary societal dynamics, encompassing challenges related to social discontent, the social acceptability of sustainability transitions, and issues of spatial inequality and representation.

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