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Anatomy of a Social Crisis and Performance as Protest Ritual in Postmodernity: The Chant of the Yellow Vests*

Gustavo Domínguez**

[ABSTRACT]

Protest has long been used as an effective communication tool for societies that have suffered from the oppression of their ruling structures. Therefore, this article aims, primarily, to analyze the components of the social drama and conflict that gave rise to the mobilizations of the “Gilets jaunes (Yellow Vests)” in France at the end of 2018 and throughout 2019. In this sense, the ritual dimension is studied, emphasizing the role of performance and its diffusion on social media as fundamental elements of the current activist context. The symbolic object, performative acts, such as music and, especially chants, are configured as an indispensable part of citizen mobilizations. For this analysis, the methodology employed was the ethnographic observation *in situ* during the marches in the city of Paris, in addition to the hemerographic review and the netnographic monitoring of the protests after 2018 in other cities of France. Through comparative analysis, these observations were contrasted with a part of the bibliography relevant to the different elements that compose this object of study and with other protests that have been significantly broadcasted in the globalized world. This confirms the importance given by democratic societies to protest as a form of citizen communication, as well as to its ritual codes. In the French context, *La Marseillaise* and *Le Chant des Partisans* stand out for their symbolic and textual load of civil resistance and active opposition to the alienations produced by the governing structures.

Keywords: Social drama and activism, yellow vests and social media, performance and protest, *La Marseillaise* and *Le Chant des Partisans*, music and rituals.

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Anatomía de una crisis social y *performance* como ritual de protesta en la posmodernidad: el canto de los chalecos amarillos

Anatomia de uma crise social e *performance* como ritual de protesto na pós-modernidade: o canto dos coletes amarelos

[RESUMEN]

Desde hace tiempo, se han usado las protestas como una herramienta de comunicación efectiva para las sociedades que han sufrido la opresión de sus estructuras gobernantes. Por consiguiente, el objetivo principal de este artículo es analizar los componentes del drama y el conflicto social que dieron lugar a las movilizaciones de los "Gilets jaunes (chalecos amarillos)" en Francia a finales del año 2018 y a lo largo de 2019. En este sentido, se estudia la dimensión ritual, enfatizando el papel del *performance* y su difusión en las redes sociales como elementos fundamentales del contexto activista actual. El objeto simbólico, los actos performativos, como la música y, en especial, los cánticos, se configuran como parte indispensable de las movilizaciones ciudadanas. Para este análisis, la metodología empleada fue la observación etnográfica *in situ* durante las marchas en la ciudad de París, además de la revisión hemerográfica y el seguimiento netnográfico de las protestas posteriores a 2018 en otras ciudades de Francia. Mediante el análisis comparativo, estas observaciones se contrastaron con una parte de la bibliografía relevante para los diferentes elementos que componen este objeto de estudio y con otras protestas que se han difundido significativamente en el mundo globalizado. Esto confirma la importancia que las sociedades democráticas le dan a la protesta como forma de comunicación ciudadana, así como a sus códigos rituales. En el contexto francés, *La Marseillaise* y *Le Chant des Partisans* se destacan por su carga simbólica y textual de resistencia civil y oposición activa a las alienaciones producidas por las estructuras de gobierno.

Palabras clave: Drama social y activismo, chalecos amarillos y redes sociales, *performance* y protesta, *La Marseillaise* y *Le Chant des Partisans*, música y rituales.

[RESUMO]

Há muito tempo os protestos são usados como uma ferramenta de comunicação eficaz para sociedades que sofreram opressão por suas estruturas dominantes. Portanto, o objetivo principal deste artigo é analisar os componentes do drama e do conflito social que deram origem às mobilizações dos "Gilets jaunes (coletes amarelos)" na França no final de 2018 e ao longo de 2019. Nesse sentido, a dimensão ritual é estudada, enfatizando o papel da *performance* e sua disseminação nas redes sociais como elementos fundamentais do contexto ativista atual. O objeto simbólico, os atos performáticos, como a música e, principalmente, as canções, configuram-se como parte indispensável das mobilizações cidadãs. Para esta análise, a metodologia utilizada foi a observação etnográfica *in situ* durante as marchas na cidade de Paris, além da revisão hemerográfica e monitoramento netnográfico dos protestos pós-2018 em outras cidades da França. Por meio da análise comparativa, essas observações foram contrastadas com uma parte da bibliografia pertinente aos diferentes elementos que compõem este objeto de estudo e com outros protestos que se espalharam de forma significativa no mundo globalizado. Isso confirma a importância que as sociedades democráticas atribuem ao protesto como forma de comunicação cidadã, bem como aos seus códigos rituais. No contexto francês, *La Marseillaise* e *Le Chant des Partisans* se destacam por sua carga simbólica e textual de resistência civil e oposição ativa às alienações produzidas pelas estruturas governamentais.

Palavras-chave: Drama social e ativismo, coletes amarelos e redes sociais, *performance* e protesto, *La Marseillaise* e *Le Chant des Partisans*, música e rituais.

Introduction

> In recent years we have been spectators to diverse expressions of nonconformity on the part of multiple collectives in all the corners of the planet. Whether for issues of (re)dignification or vindication, these groups converge in a multitudinous manner in crowded spaces under a clear premise: to protest against hierarchically superior structures. In this sense, how the conglomerates act is just as relevant as why, since it is not enough to have a motive for expressing themselves — they also need a means of transmission. The question, therefore, lies in which is the most effective system, not only to express the motives of nonconformity of a multitude, since it is also important to capture the attention of those who do not belong to the protesting group. On the other hand, the question posed could be how to directly or indirectly link other potential actors and spectators to identify themselves with the cause for which the collectives gather, and thus give greater visibility to such messages that come from the generalized nonconformity of societies. Without a doubt, within the same years, we have seen the power of performance and performative objects as an effective mechanism both for the transmission of the collectives that participate in the protests, and for their impact on the sectors they intend to attract the attention of. It is not for nothing; for example, songs, choreographies, and distinctive objects acquire values initially related to the protest as part of the spectacle, but, later on, latch on to the causes for which these groups are protesting.

On the other hand, our globalized, connected, and mediatized reality has changed the way we connect and identify with these groups. The accessibility provided by the not-so-new technologies has revealed the hidden connections of one of the edges of identity between different ideological, social, and political movements in different parts of the world. This use of technology and social networks has united the voices in the neighborhoods and cities, bringing East and West closer together and leveling cultures and nationalities to raise their voices against injustices and abuses of all kinds, as if the same social (dis)orders and alienations governed the whole world; as if we all, in some way, experienced the same problems as a society. Per the above, in this article I am concerned with analyzing the performative ritual within the mechanism of mass protest from the mobile, immobile, physical, and symbolic perspective by emphasizing the performance of *La Marseillaise* and *Le Chant des Partisans* in the context of the Yellow Vests' protests.

In relation to the above, rather than reproducing a series of data and events, which are well documented and easily accessible, the intention is to generate a series of reflections on performance as a communication mechanism, its reception, and its impact on society through social media. This is not without first

making some structural approaches to the conflict and the social drama from which the protest derives, which will serve as a theoretical scaffolding to understand, in a focused way, different events that occurred in these turbulent years of the digital revolution, including those taking place while this research was being carried out.

Social drama and conflict

The expressive behavior of protest originates in the category of conflict and social drama. In this sense, Turner (1974) observes this phenomenon within the spectrum of the crisis of institutions and everyday life, and not as something that comes from exceptional situations, although always framed within the dramatic as a product belonging to a dynamic culture (Botero 2010). Turner (1974) defines social drama as “units of inharmonic or a-harmonic processes that arise in situations of conflict” (35). From this perspective, the author “establishes four phases of public action accessible to observation: breakdown, crisis, redress action, reintegration (Botero 2010, 3).” In the following section, I will briefly summarize these constants in order to focus on those aspects in which the mechanism of protest as a performative means is inserted. This will be a starting point to analyze the context of the Yellow Vests protests in France.

Having said this, it can be observed that, according to Turner, the *breakdown* that generates social drama and conflict occurs when the relationships between individuals in a society, or between them and their organizational structures, becomes dislocated:

The sign of this breakdown is a public and notorious fracture, or a deliberate failure to comply with some essential rule governing the interaction between the parts. To flout such a norm would be an obvious symbol of dissent. In a social drama it is not a crime, though it may formally resemble one; it is, in fact, “a symbolic trigger for confrontation or encounter,” to use Frederick Bailey’s terms. There is always something altruistic in that symbolic breakdown; there is always something selfish in a crime. A dramatic breakdown may be caused by an individual, certainly, but he always acts (or thinks he does) on behalf of other parts, whether they are aware of it or not. He sees himself as a proxy, not as a lone hand (Turner 1974, 36).

Consequently, the *crisis* implies a growing problem in the relational dynamics of the parts. Here, according to Botero (2010), the *affinity of representation* appears, in which those involved manage to identify themselves homogeneously in their way of self-perceiving themselves as an affected group, as well as being able to identify the condition of the “other.” The *affinity of representation* is, therefore, one of the fundamental elements, not only for the materialization of the act of protest, but also for its subsequent reception and impact on other groups — potential or real — with a social appearance that is not necessarily similar. According to Turner, in the social drama, the *crisis* cannot be ignored or disappear if its tensions are not resolved:

Following the breakdown of regular, norm-governed social relations comes a phase of increasing crisis, during which, unless the breakdown can be isolated within a limited area of social interaction, there is a tendency for the breakdown to spread until it becomes coextensive with some dominant cleft in the larger set of relevant social relations to which the conflicting parties belong. [...] the crisis assumes a threatening stance in the forum itself, as if challenging the representatives of order to confront it. It cannot be ignored, nor does it fade away because it is not heeded (Turner 1974, 36).

As seen in the previous section, the *crisis* demands categorical actions of reparation, either in the initial phase, or in the moments when the tensions of the conflict are stronger. In any case, the affected collective requires a *redress action*:

To limit the extent of the crisis, the leading or structurally representative members of the system promptly put into operation certain “mechanisms” of adjustment and repair [...] The type and complexity of these mechanisms vary according to factors such as the depth and shared social significance of the breakdown, the social comprehensiveness of the crisis, the nature of the social group within which the breakdown took place, and the degree of its autonomy with reference to the broader systems of social relations. These mechanisms range from personal admonition, informal mediation or arbitration, to formal legal and juridical machinery, or, to resolve certain kinds of crises or legitimize other modes of resolution, the performance of public rituals (Turner 1974, 37).

Finally, in the phenomenon of social drama, *reintegration* is expected to put an end to or reduce the tensions of the conflict. With this, one seeks (ideally) the total reparation of the affected social group. In Turner’s (1974) words, “The final phase I have distinguished consists either of a reintegration of the disturbed social group or of the social recognition and legitimization of an irreparable schism between the disputing parties” (17). But what happens when, in the *crisis*, the conflict is not resolved in a timely manner in a given social space? Or what happens if such reparation does not meet the needs of the affected agent? In this sense, disagreement and nonconformity are accentuated as a result of the opposition of values and beliefs, which ultimately strengthens protest as a key element in the conflict and social drama (Martínez 2014). Thus, this mechanism, through its various forms, seeks balance through active opposition to the inharmonic or a-harmonic events referred to by Turner (1974). It should be noted that such opposition requires the *affinity of representation* to bring together the agents participating in the act in question (Botero 2010). This means that it is in the moment of the *crisis* where the various actors and potential participants find a kind of causal unison that will be extensive to all phases of said social drama. This “unison” is the ideological element that will materialize in the act of protest.

Case study: The Yellow Vests in France

From Paris, the whole world saw a social upheaval from the whole of France that has not been seen in the immediately preceding decades. In the fall of 2018 and throughout 2019, a huge wave of protests — sometimes with significant violent overtones — washed over the country because a large part of the middle class (initially) was protesting for what citizens considered an unfair rise in fuel taxes. Said measure would begin to take effect in January 2019 and would unequivocally generate the breakdown referred to by Turner as the social drama.

The collective, now famously known as the Yellow Vests (*les Gilets Jaunes*), were affected by an imminent degradation of the economy. This led them to actively star in a revolution that has had a profuse echo throughout the globalized world, leaving an incalculable balance of destroyed material goods and an important number of dead and seriously injured, including protestors and State agents (Falcon's and Paché 2020).

The Yellow Vests movement has its origins in a virtual petition launched by Priscillia Ludosky, a cosmetics trader who denounced the tax increase on gasoline and diesel, which, according to the theoretical apparatus explained before, represents the *crisis*. Ludosky began to share in September of that year her nonconformity through a collection of signatures on social media for the government of Emmanuel Macron to cancel tax increase. This petition would become more visible after it was republished by the newspaper *Le Parisien* (RT en Español 2019), which led to more signatures being added in a matter of days (Legrand 2018).

Ludosky's intentions, as well as those of several sectors of the citizenship, were simple but very clear: to use social networks to call for protest on November 17, including all people who felt wronged by the increase prepared by the government. In the same vein, technician, and driver Ghislain Coutard, who is considered responsible for giving identity to the "movement," was motivated by several videos on the Internet in response to Ludosky's request to upload a video on Facebook calling for all people to answer the call in any way possible. The simple and common, yet forceful, code that Coutard came up with so spontaneously to get people to support the protest was the yellow vest, a traffic implement that all vehicles in France must carry in the trunk as a mandatory requirement. His message read as follows, "if you support our movement, but can't attend because of a work issue, as we all have in the car a yellow vest, wear it all week until November 17 on the dashboard as a symbol of protest" (RT en Español 2019, 4:00).

Figure 1. Yellow vests protest in the Rivoli area of Paris
Source: Own photo



Unwittingly, the yellow vest and its use in context (streets and roundabouts), became the mark that reflects *the affinity of representation* in the entire population that felt affected by the unfair fuel hike (Figure 1). However, this simple garment has a symbolic reading that goes beyond a color that identifies a cause or a movement. On the one hand, being of mandatory use, it is an element of easy access for the protestors, which is effective to link all kinds of people who are in favor of the protest. On the other hand, being a traffic implement that had to be carried on the body or on the dashboard of the cars, occupying the roundabouts of the cities, it is directly related to the theme of the protests: vehicular mobility, and, ultimately, fuels. As Algan et al. (2019) state, "The movement has shifted around roundabouts, symbols of automobile mobility and the transformation of road infrastructures (there are nearly 65,000 roundabouts in France, twice the number of municipalities...)" (2).

The result of this call to protest the fuel hike, according to figures from the Ministry of the Interior, was more than 280,000 protestors, distributed in 206 blockade points (Le Monde 2018). Citizens of different political affiliations, including abstentionists and people who had never participated in protests before marched across the country, taking the Arc de Triomphe in Paris and its surrounding areas as one of the main focal points of citizen indignation:

support for the movement buries the erasure of the traditional right-left axis. The Yellow Vests bring together people whose life satisfaction indexes are very low, regardless of whether they agree with the means to address them. They are mostly former voters of Marine Le Pen, Jean-Luc Mélenchon or abstentionists (in that order). They share a more radical critique of the state and government than any of these electorates, while having more middle-of-the-road positions on moral issues such as tolerance of minorities. Analysis of the geography of the traffic circles confirms the original character of this movement. The Northeast and the Southwest are the strong points of mobilization, in other words, the two regions where Marine Le Pen and Jean-Luc Mélenchon obtained their best results in 2017 (Algan et al. 2019, 1).

In this respect, it is interesting to observe how ideologies, in principle contrary to each other, are aligned in order to fight a cause that is clearly unfair to citizens in general. According to the quote above, citizens who have been represented by the traditional parties of the *Rassemblement National*, chaired by Marine Le Pen (of the extreme right) and by *France Insoumise*, headed by Jean-Luc Mélenchon (of the extreme left), put aside their political differences to raise their voices in the act of protest against a measure that reduces the purchasing power of the working classes. In addition to this, there was a significant number of protestors who had never participated in any kind of events of this kind and who did not belong to any kind of party or organization. As we can see, all these sectors protested because they were intervened by the *affinity of representation*:

According to a survey conducted in traffic circles by a group of researchers, they are usually first-time activists who have never participated in a political group or trade union movement. A poll by the IPSOS institute published in December tested a candidacy of the yellow vests in the next European elections. The list could obtain 12% of the votes (Algan et al. 2019, 2).

Consequently, from November 17 onwards, and every Saturday, protestors would gather for issues related to the initial appeal of the fuel hike, but they would also be joined by other types of actors who had also been affected by government policies for other reasons, such as students, farmers, and, in general, professionals with low salaries (Gil 2018). Taking this into account, when making an x-ray of the anatomy of the protestors' sectors, it should be kept in mind that:

47% of workers and almost 35% of employees 'fully' support the yellow vests, compared to 27% of retirees. Nearly 70% of those who strongly support them live in a household with a net disposable income of less than 2,480 euros, the average income in France. And 17% live in a household with less than 1,136 euros (Algan et al. 2019, 3).

The result of the prolonged and tense days of protests was — at least until that moment —, the freezing of electricity, fuel, and gas prices (El Confidencial 2018), which constitutes the action of *redress*. The then Prime Minister at the time, Édouard Philippe, announced that “The government is ready for dialogue and is demonstrating it because this tax increase has been removed from the budget law for 2019” (BBC News Mundo 2018), which for the protesting population was considered an act of *reintegration*.

Although “the movement” has now lost strength, it continues to denounce the social problems afflicting the French working-middle class, even now as the health emergency that began in early 2020 in Europe continues to escalate and bring other issues to light. Once again, the call was to take to the streets and protest because, despite the state of alarm, “democracy cannot be postponed by coronavirus” (Europa Press 2020). And, although these newer appearances of the Yellow Vests in 2020 turned out to be less violent, the slogans are still related to the initial protests in 2018. This is noted in the following commentary:

“We are here, we are here,” chanted a group of protesters near the Palais de la Bourse in Paris. “Macron, resign,” shouted others. “Social regression is not negotiated, it is fought,” read the banner carried by some protesters. While one of the participants simply asked “to be able to fill the fridge with dignity” another had written on his yellow vest the slogan “solidarity, equality, liberty.” (El Mundo 2020) [Inspired by the Republic’s official slogan: liberty, equality and fraternity (*Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité*), coming from the French Revolution].

Finally, it should be noted that the gain that the Yellow Vests achieved with their intense days of protest goes beyond the cancellation of the fuel hike because, even if nowadays “the movement” has diminished its convening power and its image has been affected by the numerous acts of violence that the protests have left behind, its participation in the French political scene is considered to have been a moral and cultural victory for the protesters. It is thus revealed that, at least in this case, citizen protest has been an effective system of communication between protesters and leaders, even if the cost of getting the message across to the structures of power often involves material damage, permanent physical injury or even loss of life, the toll of which falls mainly on the civilian population:

The success of the Yellow Vests is to have made visible a less visible country: synthesizing a lot, because it is a complex and heterogeneous movement, that of the white working class, the losers of globalization [...] Dominique Reynié, director of the think tank Fondapol, believes that the movement demonstrates a fundamental crisis: “nobody is able anymore to anticipate, express or regulate social conflicts through classical organizations such as trade unions or parties,” he says. “In a French society facing multiple questions, linked like everywhere else in Europe to demographics, distribution of wealth, access to services or taxation, discontent is expressed without union or political mediation. This phenomenon has created the Yellow Vests and will inevitably reproduce itself. The Yellow Vests are not over. They may return, calling themselves Yellow Vests or otherwise” (Bassets 2019).

From protest as a form of communication to performance as mechanism of protest

As we have seen, protest as a consequence of social drama can materialize from the constant *crisis to reintegration*, as long as the affected party is not repaid. When analyzing this phenomenon from its different flanks, it is observed that the “movement,” be it that of the Yellow Vests or any other protesting collective, is presented as a conceptual component, as well as a bodily and emotional one. That is, in the activist context of protest the “movement” is reflected in the political, the personal, and the physical, the latter understood within the real and performative sense (Rech 2019).

“Movement” — as a collective and coordinated element in public spaces —, is important not only in the somatic and kinesthetic sense of the experiential circumstance of the participants directly involved, but, also, in the scope it may generate in potential spectators. Through its appearance in the activist context, which generally involves the visual and the auditory, the indexical force of the body is revealed in a collectively visible way in such a way that it demands categorical recognition (Rech 2019; Butler 2011).

For Butler (2015), collective movements such as that of the yellow vests acquire the name of *assembly*, whose motif of convergence possesses a further reading of meanings. These are expressed through the concerted plurality of performative corporeality. It should be clarified that the *assembly* referred to by Butler, in the activist context, differs from the meeting because the latter describes a collective of defined members. While the former is a gathering that, although it assumes specific purposes, is not hermetic in the entry or exit of transitory actors. Because of this, the term *assembly* encompasses the indeterminate, the brief, and the heterogeneous within the collective sense of contemporary political activism (Rech 2019). This can be observed in numerous protest manifestations in which usually, it is the minority that belongs to some political movement as such, since the majority are transient actors who have joined the collective by the force of the performative act. These include mass movement, symbolic objects, sound, and, undoubtedly, the *affinity of representation* mentioned by Botero (2010) in Turner’s (1974) constant of *crisis* of social drama. In fact, I emphasize that many of these protest conglomerates are characterized by the absence of visible leaders, such as in the case of the Yellow Vests and other collectives, because, although spokespersons may exist, the protesters are guided by the generalized sense of the malaise afflicting that particular society, highlighting the *crisis* that generally involves issues of economic, political, and social order (McGarry et al. 2019). This spectrum especially encompasses demands ranging from improving working conditions, lowering taxes, and issues of race and gender, among other issues.

Based on all this, we should think about Rech’s (2019) approach, where she questions “What forms do these bodily productions assume? What choreographic formats are applied in contexts of political assembly? Why do these applications exist?” (58). In this case, Rech is concerned with studying the circular choreographic format of dance, to which he adds other questions such as, “What defines this practice of collective movement? What is its political dimension? And lastly, which roles are played by the body and its ‘response/ability’ in the context of the ethics of political responsibility and mindful practice of movement?” (59).

The point is that these questions can be removed from the initial context posed by Rech and shifted into various manifestations in collective performative terms. Some of these points can even be separated from the movement as a physical phenomenon and extrapolated to purely symbolic and ideological aspects, as occurs with certain types of elements arising from the performative practice of protest. By this, I refer to objects, marks, and images that, through

their premeditated use in specific spaces, have acquired symbolic and ideological meanings. Even outside their original context and, although the political messages are constant, they do not necessarily define a political position or a party, but really diversities of collectives that are intervened by the *affinity of representation* (McGarry et al. 2019; Botero 2010). In this sense, we note, for example, purple objects (usually used in feminist protests), the recent slogan *Black Lives Matter* and, of course, the wearing of yellow vests, which has gone beyond French borders and has spread to the context of protest in countries such as Iraq, Serbia, Belgium, Spain, Hungary, and Germany (Beswick and Rodríguez 2018). On this, it is stated that:

Images are not only a product of movements, but are also 'part of the symbolic practices which constitute the movement and its identity' (Daphi et al, 2013, p. 76). We acknowledge that there are limitations to focusing on visual imagery alone as other forms of meaning making and communication exist to capture and articulate everyday practices during a protest occupation such as banners and chants. It is important to remember that images, even iconic imagery, do not necessarily amplify specific demands although, we maintain, they always carry a political message (McGarry et al. 2019, 3).

The above validates the object of this research insofar as I have intended: on the one hand, to study the ritual of protest as a set of elements, beyond its isolated components — that is, as a complex machine functioning at an expressive level through the act of performance; on the other hand, as I stated at the beginning, studying this behavior in a *scopic* way will allow us to theoretically situate some aspects of the different protests that have originated in the last decade and in these incipient twenties, although I take the case of the Yellow Vests in France as a referential model. Thus, continuing with the idea that gives name to this epigraph, I will direct the reflections around the protest as a form of communication and the performance as a mechanism of protest, considering that I have already dealt with this phenomenon around the social drama and the Turner conflict.

Ritual dimension of protest

In all coordinated group activities, there are parameters by which those participating in a given event are governed. Whether in the context of an office, a supermarket, a soccer match, a popular festival or a mass manifestation, the attendees who genuinely benefit from the act are ruled by a series of codes that articulate the activities that take place in their respective contexts. In fact, one of the definitions that best fits the ritual dimension I want to showcase in the field of protest is that of the popular festival, but in a parodic sense. Here, the ritual code supposes the active or contemplative disposition to participate in the activities, in order to obtain an expressive benefit from the festival, which is enjoyment as the ultimate end (Domínguez 2021). This is further explained by Martí (2008, 15) in the commentary below:

The ceremonial dimension appears intimately linked to the notion of festivity, and this implies an important content in rituals, in the broadest sense of the term, that is to say, specific actions with very concrete rules that correspond to determined situations and whose main characteristic is repetition as well as a purpose that is not instrumental but expressive. Every celebration has its rituals, religious or profane. We are talking, then, about morphological elements with a very concrete syntax that, evidently, are historically and culturally conditioned.

As can be seen in the above quote, in the popular festival (understood as a phenomenon of expression), as well as in mass protest, there is a ritual dimension to performative acts. This means that, in both cases, there is a series of defined practices, codes, and behaviors by which those who are recognized as beneficiaries of the act are (or should be) governed. However, the difference, as I have already noted, is the parodic given that when the celebration ends, the temporary and symbolic annulment of order disappears, and with it, all the elements that are part of that interstitial space of alternative reality (Martí 2008). In line with this, Gil Calvo (1991) affirms that:

this deliberate disorder only occurs during the festive time because, as soon as the feast is over, the water returns to its course and the distinctions transgressed during the feast recover with the normality of their ordinary meaning: men become men again, adults become adults, the superior, superior and the powerful, powerful (and women, women, minors, minors, the inferior, inferior, and the impotent, impotent) (63).

On the other hand, when protesting, the transgressed areas do not return to their course, and although the festive and the parodic are variables of the ritual dimension that may (or may not) appear, there are no defined parameters that reestablish order immediately. Not even with violent repression by the structures that hold power, which, although they may dissipate some focuses of protest, in no case do they put an end to the social drama that gave rise the protest. On the contrary, repressive action against peaceful protests makes the tensions of the conflict even more visible. This shows that, as an adverse effect, the acts of brutality of state bodies towards the civilian population become viral, which is documented by the protesters themselves with their phones and disseminated on social media. Specially since the traditional media — which are often in favor of the government establishment — are more concerned with showing the excesses accusing the legitimate protesters, rather than reporting the reality of the situations (McGarry et al. 2019).

The ritual dimension to which I refer is closely related to the questions raised by Rech (2019). In such a sphere, the bodily forms that this phenomenon acquires have, as a *conditio sine qua non*, a performative component in the broad sense of the concept: marching, dancing (in all its variants), the representation of everyday activities, mobilization with banners and placards with formal or satirical slogans and, especially, chants and shouts with specific messages. We could then assure that, without at least one of these performative components that make up the ritual dimension, the protests would not be successful.

Thus, we see that the ritual dimension with which this article is concerned assumes, as a first step, the *affinity of representation* as a fundamental code of protest, given that once the group or groups are identified with a given cause, the performative acts — which are usually peaceful representations — will be spontaneously configured in most cases. That is to say, once the *affinity of representation* has appeared, even at a primary level, the ritual dimension of the protest will manifest itself *in situ*.

Evidently, these kinds of codes and practices that emerge from the rite of protest are characterized by simplicity in technique and austerity in sophistication, which allows, among other things, a direct call to be made to passers-by who are close to the space occupied by the protesters and to those people who see the performative acts on social networks. Thus, with chants, dances and other simple and easily repeated performances, potential new members are invited to participate in the protesting collective, shaping the amalgam of interests that converge in the *assembly* mentioned by Butler (2015). This factor of simplicity is fundamental, because, with a higher technical level and sophistication of the representations, the less binding the constant of participation will be for the unsuspecting passerby, even if, eventually, the performance of the protest turns out to be more striking.

As a corollary to this reflection, it remains to be noted that the ritualization or performance of the protests has an ulterior intention to the physical phenomenon observed in the spaces occupied by the protesters. It is, therefore, a question of political awareness and the transmission of values that seek to combat the alienation generated in the conflict of the social drama (Mok 2021). The performance, therefore, in the activist context is a practice that is beyond a trivial exhibition of spontaneous theatrics, chants, and dances that are lost in the multitudinous amalgam of the manifestation, for, in itself, the ritualization of protest is both transitive and reflexive. Protesters become sensitized to a particular cause and seek to sensitize others through certain performative acts:

Ritual sensibility is essential to the promulgation and the passing-on of social and political values. This applies not only to ritualized protests that are largely peaceful, rational, and non-violent but also to militant protests that are open to the use of violence. This emphasis on the underlying importance of ritual sensibility invites both the liberal democratic and the radical factions to introspect whether their own political praxes have portents of formalization and ossification (Mok 2021, 1).

Functions and meanings of *La Marseillaise* and *Le Chant des Partisans* in the context of the Yellow Vests

As has been made clear, images are an essential identifier in the act of protest. However, when it comes to purely visual symbolic objects, as is the case of the yellow vest, limitations can be encountered when articulating discourses and linking new agents to the act of protest (McGarry et al. 2019). Therefore, resources such as singing and musical expressions have emerged as almost omnipresent elements of the ritual dimension of the protest:

Around the world, music plays an important role in mobilizing social movements. Song is not only a tool for peaceful protest, it also helps to build a protest identity by linking the protest movement to its political and social environment. Above all, social movements are to a large extent etched in people's minds through their music, and it is often the music that determines their future impact on local politics, including the politics of conflict (Rühlig 2016, 63).

The performative expressions in the Yellow Vests' protests were, in a way, the counterweight mechanism to the violent situations observed in public squares and parks in France because, as usually happens during citizen protests around the world, most participants act peacefully because they know that violent acts distort the causes of the mobilizations.

According to the above, two of the performative acts that attracted the most attention during the Yellow Vests protests because of their diffusion on social media were *La Marseillaise* and *Le Chant des Partisans*. Many citizens of different ages, particularly adults, gathered in various parts of the country to sing what historically have been considered as anthems of the quintessential resistance of the French people.

The well-known *Marseillaise*, initially entitled *Chant de Guerre de l'armée du Rhin*, was composed in 1792 by the military Rouget de Lisle and Louisa Dietrich, in the context of the War against the King of Bohemia and Hungary (Chabaud 1936). The piece, textually intended for the voluntary mobilization of citizens to protect the homeland from danger, is associated from its beginnings to the opposition to the tyrannical rule of the monarchy. Below is an excerpt:

La Marseillaise

Couplets :

Allons ! Enfants de la Patrie ! Le jour de gloire est arrivé !

Contre nous de la tyrannie, l'étendard sanglant est levé ! (Bis).

Entendez-vous dans les campagnes Mugir ces féroces soldats ?

Ils viennent jusque dans vos bras Égorger vos fils, vos compagnes.

Refrain :

Aux armes, citoyens ! Formez vos bataillons ! Marchons, marchons ! Qu'un sang impur... Abreuve nos sillons !

La Marseillaise

Verse:

Come on, sons of the fatherland! The day of glory has come!

Against us, those of tyranny, the bloody banner rises! (Bis).

Do you hear in the field the roar of these fierce soldiers?

They come to your arms to slaughter your sons, your companions.

Refrain:

To arms, citizens! Form your battalions! Let's march, let's march! Let the impure blood... water our furrows!

Le Chant des Partisans (the Song of the Partisans), less known outside the French context, is a work written by Soviet-born singer and composer Anna Marly, in collaboration with Maurice Duron and Josep Kessel against the German troops during World War II. The piece was massively played for the first time in 1943, thanks to the BBC radio station in London. It connected the voices of the French resistance with their free fellow citizens in England. At that time, the role of the station was fundamental because it allowed the Free French to install a radio station called *Honneur et Patrie* (Honor and Fatherland), through which the song was broadcast. It was even broadcast into German prison camps (Raskin 1991). Below is an excerpt from the text of the song:

Le Chant des Partisans

Ami, entends-tu le vol noir des corbeaux sur nos plaines ?

Ami, entends-tu les cris sourds du pays qu'on enchaîne ?

Ohé, partisans, ouvriers et paysans, c'est l'alarme.

Ce soir l'ennemi connaîtra le prix du sang et les larmes.

Montez de la mine, descendez des collines, camarades !

The Song of the Partisans

Friend, do you hear the black flight of the crows on our plains?

Friend, do you hear the muffled cries of the chaining country?

"Ohé," partisans, workers and peasants, is the alarm.

Tonight the enemy will know the price of blood and tears.

Up from the mines, down from the hills, comrades!

<i>Sortez de la paille les fusils, la mitraille, les grenades.</i>	Draw from the straw the rifles, the machine gun, the grenades.
<i>Ohé, les tueurs à la balle et au couteau, tuez vite !</i>	“Ohé,” murderers with the bullet and the knife, kill quickly! “
<i>Ohé, saboteur, attention à ton fardeau : dynamite...</i>	Ohé,” saboteur, beware of the charge: dynamite....

As in their original contexts, these historic chants reappeared in the protests of the Yellow Vests in various parts of the country, to which, as activist Priscillia Ludosky narrates in her case, law enforcement officers responded with force to manifestations that did not involve any violence (RT en Español 2019). In this sense, performative performances, especially those of *La Marseillaise* and *Le Chant des Partisans*, were fundamental responses to state repression. Indeed, as McGarry et al. (2019) and Rech (2019) assert, music, song, and dance are tools to confront the brutal actions of repression by the authority. In addition, they help to unify the collectives, not only in ideological and energetic terms, but also in the physical sense that allows protesters to keep the spaces of protest occupied. Thus, the elements that arise from the ritual are effective “to counter violent and extremely physically difficult situations, such as when tear gas is used” (Rech 2019, 61), or when “non-lethal” dispersal weapons are used.

Based on the questions previously posed by Rech, we can then ask ourselves why performative practices that derive from music, especially those involving chanting, are so effective in the context of current protests in the context of the digital revolution. To understand this in the context of the Yellow Vests, as well as in any other current activist context, we must look, on the one hand, directly towards Allan Merriam’s (2006) *Anthropology of Music*. Although composed of a series of classical topics –to some extent already superseded by recent studies– allows an approximation to the origin of the question that has been posed; and, on the other hand, towards Derrida and Prenowitz’s (1995) *Archive Fever*.

Indeed, we can observe how performative acts with music, especially if it is sung, have a profound effect in the context of protest, first of all because of their *communicative* capacity (Merriam 2006). Recall that performance in the activist context has the expressive function of conveying the discomforts of social drama and conflict raised by Turner in the context of the *crisis*.

The case of *La Marseillaise* and *Le Chant des Partisans* in this context implies an act of active opposition against the Macron government’s tariff policies and social regression, because as we have seen, the texts of both works call the civilian population to resistance, and even, to confrontation in a direct way. In fact, in the occupations of the Yellow Vests, adaptations of *Le Chant des Partisans* have been made to current issues with texts such as the one below:

Le Chant des Partisans

Ami entends-tu le vol noir de la finance sur nos payes.

Ami entends-tu la souffrance populaire sans pareille.

Ohé villageois, citadines et banlieusards, c'est l'alarme.

Ce soir l'ennemi connaîtra le prix du sang et des larmes.

Sortez des usines, des bureaux et des cuisines, gilets jaunes.

Sortez les palettes, braseros, les barricades, gilets jaunes.

Ohé travailleurs, les chômeuses, les étudiantes, venez vite.

Ohé les sans-dents, fainéants, les illettrés, tout de suite.

C'est nous qui trimons jour et nuit pour une paie de misère.

Les taxes qui nous pressent, les très riches qui s'engraissent, la galère.

The Song of the Partisans

Friends, listen to the black flight of finance on our salaries.

Friends, listen to the unparalleled suffering of the people.

"Ohé" Villagers, city dwellers and suburbanites, it is the alarm.

Tonight the enemy will know the price of blood and tears.

Come out of the factories, out of the offices and out of the kitchens, yellow vests.

Bring out the paddles, the braziers, the barricades and the yellow vests.

"Ohé" the workers, the unemployed women, the students, come quickly.

"Ohé" the toothless, homeless, illiterate, right now.

It is we who work day and night for miserable pay.

The taxes that squeeze us, the very rich that fatten, the misery.

As can be seen, the modification of the text is intended to adapt to the current context, in that it communicates a reality to different sectors of the population who are violated by state policies to cease all activities and join the protest. Basically, the slogan could be interpreted as follows: if we all feel affected by the government, we are all yellow vests. On this aspect of communication, Merriam (2006) asserts that:

In the latter half of the Twentieth Century it may well be that the very existence of man depends on the accuracy of his communications. Communication among people is a two-way street: speaking and listening, informing and being informed, constructively evaluating and welcoming constructive criticism. Communication is accurate to the extent that it is founded on a sure knowledge of the man with whom we would hold intercourse (10).

In the same vein, it is observed that in the activist context a number of behaviors and sensitivities can be *symbolized* through music. This is due to its sensuality and capacity for articulation, which thanks to the various mechanisms of its dynamic structure (melody, harmony, rhythm, text, capacity for identification, remembrance, energetic, ideological and emotional aspects) can express vital elements more fully than other forms of language (Rühlig 2016; Merriam 2006). Recall, for example, the yellow vest as a symbolic object in the sense of McGarry et al. (2019), which does not necessarily articulate a concrete demand, although it always supports a political message.

The point, however, is that interacting with its meanings requires some form of prior knowledge on what the element symbolizes. Music, instead, penetrates directly into the listener because feeling, emotion, movement and, ultimately, life itself, constitute its essence (Merriam 2006). In this regard, Frith (2001) assumes another type of role for popular music — a term that, in this case, will be understood in a broad sense, insofar as it encompasses all musical genres that are (re)known by a given collective — to explain that its main use, individually or collectively, responds to identity issues. According to the author, it is a search for self-definition and a latent intention to find a place in the core of society. It is, therefore, a question of identification.

The above, transferred to the activist context of the yellow vests, offers a dialogue between several of the authors I have cited above because, on the one hand, the music sung in the universe of protest assumes a direct form of binding communication with different sectors of French society that are immersed in the social drama and conflict. We can also observe that songs like *La Marseillaise* and *Le Chant des Partisans*, which are works with a prominent civil charge, have historically symbolized and currently symbolize an act of resistance against oppression and tyranny. Most importantly, it is unified in the *affinity of representation* to the huge mass of citizens that generated the formation of the collective of the yellow vests. Thus, the spontaneous interpretations of these works in the activist context are, without a doubt, also an expression of nationalism. As Frith (2001) states:

it is not surprising that popular music has always played an important role in nationalism. In Abel Gance's silent film *Napoleon*, there is a scene in which we see "La Marseillaise" being composed, and then the song can be seen making its way through the mass of the Assembly until everyone is singing along. When the film was released in France, the audience would rise from their seats and sing along to the national anthem. Only music seems to be able to create that kind of spontaneous collective identity, that personal assumption of patriotic sentiment (243).

Thus, as Rühlig (2016) states, art as a general expression and music as a particular vehicle of that expression are among the most widespread means of manifestation in the activist context. The interesting point is that songs also offer the opportunity for artists (spontaneous or consecrated) to show their support for a given cause. These causes become much more visible if the support for the manifestations comes from recognized personalities. That said, music is categorically presented as an element at the service of protest that communicates and symbolizes aspects of protest in the context of the *crisis*.

On the other hand, music in the activist context can also influence the behavior of protesters. The *physical response*, as discussed by Merriam (2006), is no less important than *communication* or *symbolization*. As might be recalled from the beginning of this section, protest was defined as a mechanism of collective expression comprising a series of codes that govern those who participate in manifestations. This aspect of rituality may imply that the actors are better attuned to the act of mobilization through music. However, we must bear in mind that this response is conditioned by cultural delimitations:

Music also elicits, excites, and channels crowd behavior; it encourages physical reactions of the warrior and the hunter; it calls forth the physical response of the dance, which may be of prime necessity to the occasion at hand. The production of physical response seems clearly to be an important function of music; the question of whether this is primarily a biological response is probably overridden by the fact that it is culturally shaped (Merriam 2006, 224).

This behavior in which music plays a fundamental role in the physical aspect of the ritual dimension is clearly observed in traditional popular festivities with processions (Domínguez 2021). Here we observe more similarities between popular festivities and protests. After all, it could be argued that a mobilization of protesters through the main streets and squares of a city is, in principle, a kind of processional act that is, to a certain extent, driven by music.

Another element of importance of music in the activist context, which is probably on the same level as the act of *symbolizing* and *communicating* concrete demands, is the *capacity to reinforce conformity to social norms* (Merriam 2006). In the case at hand, both songs, in their historical contexts and in the occupations by the Yellow Vests, express the alienations suffered by the French, reminding us in a forceful way of what goes against the interests of the community. These chants even propose solutions to reestablish certain social norms.

To close this section, I take from Merriam (2006), the capacity of music to *contribute to the integration of society* and to *validate social institutions*. I have already discussed these properties to some extent in Turner's social drama and conflict because, as can be deduced, the first of these aspects is linked to Botero's (2010) *affinity of representation*, insofar as music offers a system of solidarity that has an effect not only on those who actively participate in the protest, but can also attract potential new actors to the stage who are identified with the cause that motivates the manifestation. The second is directly related to the *communicative* and *symbolic* elements. As Merriam (2006) states:

“the primary function of song is to preserve order, to co-ordinate the ceremonial symbols...” (1950:288), and Burrows comments that one of the functions of song in the Tuamotus is “imparting magical potency by incantations” (1933:54). We may also recall Freeman's assertion that stabilizing verses are sung when there exists “a long-term frustration or conflict in personal needs or cultural demands which is tied in with the mores of the society [sic]”; in such a case the conflict is described and a sanctioned solution suggested. (224)

Protest in the era of digital revolution

We have already noted the importance of performative acts in the activist context. However, it is time to analyze this phenomenon in greater depth taking into account the facilities provided by the technology of our time.

Undoubtedly, the Yellow Vests movement was successful not only because it gathered a series of messages from the working classes, or because, as a symbolic object, the distinctive garment represented a series of political codes. The importance of the reception of the events through the citizenry's mobile devices and their ease of dissemination from the most incipient period to the most critical stages of that social drama are evident. We can then approach this field taking into account that, at present, there is an irrepressible need to document all the activities that make up our lives (Domínguez 2021), a phenomenon that Derrida and Prenowitz have called *La maladie d'archive* (Archive Fever) (1995).

Considering the above, it would be implausible to think that people attacked in the Yellow Vest's protests –or in any other activist occupation– wish to recall in any degree of nostalgia the moments in which they were violated, or the moments in which they saw other citizens die in a protest. In reality, beyond the trivial dissemination of facts that can be lost in the infinite universe of the internet (which is also not exempt from censorship), this archival fever provides a (sometimes) effective protection mechanism against the abuse of force by state authorities. In my opinion, the following comment by Foucault (1972) provides a more concrete explanation of archive fever in the activist context:

The archive is first the law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events. But the archive is also that which determines that all these things said do not accumulate endlessly in an amorphous mass, nor are they inscribed in an unbroken linearity, nor do they disappear at the mercy of chance external accidents; but they are grouped together in distinct figures, composed together in accordance with multiple relations, maintained or blurred in accordance with specific regularities; that which determines that they do not withdraw at the same pace in time, but shine, as it were, like stars, some that seem close to us shining brightly from afar off, while others that are in fact close to us are already growing pale (129).

Having said that, it is worth noting that, in the crisis, *the affinity of representation* catalyzes its effects and increases the “unison” that links new protesters through the diffusion of violent acts by institutions, even in scenarios that are distant both geographically, culturally, and ideologically. In the case of the Yellow Vests, one of the most representative figures has been that of Jérôme Rodrigues, who, transmitting through his phone the manifestation he attended in Paris on to social networks, lost an eye when shot with a Defense Bullet Launcher [*Lanceur de balles de défense*] (LBD), which was triggered by a police officer (Ouest-France 2019). To Rodrigues’ case, we can add that of Zineb Redouane, an 80-year-old woman who died in Marseille when she was hit in the face with a tear gas canister in the same wave of protests, the only difference being that she was at home and was not an active participant in the manifestation. Undoubtedly, the free circulation of these cases on social media increased the popularity of the “movement” because it evidenced police brutality against the civilian population that was predominantly marching peacefully to claim their rights (France Soir 2019).

As can be observed, these phenomena of repressive violence perpetrated by agents of the State, which are documented and disseminated by ordinary citizens, instead of putting an end to a latent problematic, achieve the disapproval of the majority of people towards governmental procedures in the field of social drama, and it is in this spectrum where new actors join the causes that swell the manifestations. This is the reason why, for example, the slogan *Black Lives Matters*, which arose in the United States due to the death by asphyxiation of citizen George Floyd by the police in the city of Minneapolis, had so much visibility and generated massive marches in several countries.

In a similar case to that of the victims during the Yellow Vest’s protests, the death of Dylan Cruz, during the 2019 Colombian National Strike (N21) marches, and that of Lucas Villa, in the protests that began on April 28, 2021, stand out amongst so many other people killed, injured, and even raped and disappeared at the expense of the Colombian State. These last manifestations of 2021, which are assumed to be the continuation of those of N21 in 2019, and which were suspended due to the surge of the pandemic, have been especially marked by the live documentation of the government’s massive violent repression of the protesters and the censorship of the traditional media (Aguilar 2020). Although, also, the publications on social media of those who, *in situ*, showed the world their own tragedies on Facebook, YouTube and Instagram live feeds have been censored.

This, among other issues, caused the awareness and pronouncement of multitudes of Colombians abroad in, from, and towards all these digital platforms. Generating numerous marches: Paris, Vienna, Lucerne, Madrid, Montreal, and New York, among other places in the world, joined in the *affinity of representation* to occupy the main squares of those cities under the hashtags *#nosestanmatando* [“They are killing us”] and *#soscolombia*, showing the international opinion and media what was happening within the framework of the protests.

To conclude this section, it should be noted that these protests have been characterized both by their duration and by the unprecedented artistic display in the history of that country. Graffiti, performances, dance and, of course, music, have played a fundamental role of expression and resistance by the generation of young adults. A phenomenon that no doubt will be an object of study of substance for the social and humanistic sciences. In this sense, I believe that, despite the variability of sources and statistics, the production of a scientific and academic bibliography should not be prolonged for fear of falling into "premature outdatedness." Instead of being a disadvantage for research that deals with topics in immediate development, they are mechanisms that help to generate reliable and solid sources for the future.

Possibly, the hidden connections of these various scenarios could be revealed if we venture to state that, in a way, the marches that started at the end of 2018, and went viral around the world, paved, to some extent, the way for all the protests that were triggered during 2019, a particularly convulsive year in the global activist context. After all, it is difficult for an event like the victory of the Yellow Vests, especially in places as iconic as Paris, to go unnoticed by public opinion and not leave a message to citizens to fight for the rights to which they are entitled. More so if the possibility of raising their voices outside of media machines paid by the State can occur and cause impact.

Final considerations

Citizen protests occur as part of the conflict that affects societies within the framework of social drama. Whether due to issues that require attention in matters of socioeconomic regression, or due to aspects of race, gender, ideologies or other types of claims, the affected populations find in this expressive mechanism a massive form of communication that, through its different ritual codes, ensures that citizen demands are heard by the structures that hold power. This, in the current context, is enhanced by the powerful dissemination tool provided by the technology of social media to those who benefit from the expressive and communicative sense of the manifestations.

Performance as a code of the ritual dimension of peaceful protest, acts, on the one hand, as an amplifying device for what the protesters have to say to their leaders, but also functions as a moral shield against the violent repression of the agents of law and order. Symbolic objects, theatrical representations, dances, musical performances and, in the case of this article, chants, appear as a fundamental part of the ritualization of the act of mobilization and are manifested in active opposition to violent acts. In general, these types of performative expressions are characterized because, thanks to their technical austerity, their popularity and being easy to recall and repetitiveness, they can bind new actors to join the causes driving the manifestations.

In this sense, the performance of *La Marseillaise* and *Le Chant des Partisans* as elements of the ritual dimension of the protest in the Yellow Vest's marches are assessed, based on the fact that these are works with a symbolic and literal connotation of resistance for the French people in the face of the different alienations that, since historical times, this society has experienced. The function of these songs in the postmodern activist context concerning the Yellow Vests in France, their ways of linking to new actors, and their effects in the context of the manifestations have also been assessed.

From this, it stands out that chanting in the context of protest communicates and symbolizes the aspects that make up the social drama. Moreover, in physical terms, it helps the protesters to have the spaces occupied due, among other things, to their energetic and emotional capacity. In turn, it also reinforces the organic sense of institutions and demands the correct functioning of the rules that govern societies. Performance in the framework of peaceful protest, therefore, has long been configured as a weapon against weapons, as a cry of the voiceless and, above all, as a valuable possession of the dispossessed and the destitute in both ancient and contemporary societies.

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