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BEYOND THE HAND OF THE STATE

Vigilantism against migrants and refugees in France

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Introduction

So far, vigilantism has attracted remarkably little scholarly and public attention in France. While sporadic research has focused on popular justice (Michel, 2011; Brodeur and Jobard, 2005) and citizen participation in policing operations (Favarel-Garrigues and Gayer, 2016), the empirical study of contemporary practices of vigilantism taking place in France is in its infancy at best. Even though France has a long tradition of popular violence following political unrest, especially in the midst of the French Revolution, in fact, the central state has been effective in enforcing a monopoly over the system of criminal justice since the second half on the nineteenth century (Michel, 2011). In this sense, France follows a common pattern among Western European countries, where strong state institutions and efficient law-enforcement systems have progressively neutralized most of citizens' substitutes for legal justice.

Contemporary practices of vigilantism, however, are not only the result of the negotiation between public actors and aggregated private interests, but are also indebted to the various configurations and historical trajectories by which state actors have contended to citizens the right to maintain public order. If in other countries, most notably in the US, contemporary vigilante actors can at least try to legitimize their practices in light of their historical embeddedness, the opposite holds true in France. Within the European context, France has been singled out as a paradigmatic case for the development of "court rationality" standards in the legal system, as well as for the monopolization of the legitimate means of violence by growing state apparatuses (Elias, 1969). Since, historically, vigilante groups have faced the structural tendency of the French State to centralize police powers, invoking the past has proved not only an inefficient strategy, but also a rather powerful source of disqualification for these actors (Favarel-Garrigues and Gayer, 2016).

Yet, despite these structural constraints to vigilante mobilization, there have been numerous spontaneous outburst of anti-migrant violence, with the tacit approval of local communities. As citizens progressively lose faith in law enforcement agencies, France witnessed a series of episodes in which groups of individuals try to take the law in their own hands, or at least evoke to resorting to “do-it-yourself” justice when other established means fail. In past years, notable cases of lynching justice have concerned in particular the French Roma community. In 2008, unsubstantiated rumours about the Roma community of Marseille led to an attack against three Roma men. Assaulted by a mob of about a hundred persons, their car was set on fire and only the intervention of the police avoided worse consequences.¹ The voicing of discriminatory and stereotypical views of Roma by politicians and governmental representatives legitimized intimidation of Roma people by French citizens, with the result that attacks by private citizens and groups continued unabated in France in the following years (Amnesty International, 2014). In 2014, a 16-year-old Roma boy accused of burglary by local residents in a small town of the Paris region was abducted and tortured in a cellar, beaten into a coma, and left unconscious in a shopping trolley (Naydenova, 2014).

A similar scenario has emerged in more recent years, in concomitance with the emergence of the so-called refugee “crisis”. Public debates on migration hit France at a time of permanent state of exception, as the country experienced two consecutive years of state of “emergency” from 2015 to 2017, allowing for unprecedented restrictions on civil society. In this context, the perceived failure of the French immigration and security regime, as well as the effects of the political crisis following the 2008 Recession, had a profound impact on the political climate of the country, fuelling not only hostility against migrants, but also anti-establishment sentiment and distrust in state institutions. The perceived unresponsiveness of French authorities grew exponentially in response to heated debates on humanitarian emergencies at the French borders, most notably concerning the Calais “Jungle”, and following the hesitant steps taken by the French government to address the crisis. This further reflected mounting sentiments of anxiety, and frustration against public authorities among local communities. The combination of declining trust in State authorities and growing concerns about individual and collective security is likely to offer today new political opportunities to contest the monopoly over the legitimate use of violence, paving the way to vigilante practices.

This chapter offers a first, explorative analysis of vigilante practices in contemporary France. It offers an overview of the activities of street patrolling promoted in the wake of the so-called refugee crisis by two different types of actors: the citizen association *Les Calaisiens en Colère* and the political association *Les Identitaires*. The chapter highlights crucial organizational factors in their vigilante activism, focusing on the stated purposes and values of citizen activists. Empirically, it uses original data from three in-depth interviews with French activists, and media reports on far-right and anti-immigration mobilization. Additional material collected during fieldwork is used to contextualize the interview and media data. The

findings show that attempts to take charge of the implementation of the law in France do not configure a blatant challenge to the authorities or the state monopoly of law and order. To the contrary, extreme right and anti-refugee movements present themselves as complementary law enforcement agencies, mobilizing strategically using the notion of “dissuasion”.

Political and cultural opportunities for vigilantism in France

As vigilantism is still largely understudied in France, it is difficult to assess the political opportunities for this form of mobilization. If vigilantism originates from two major transformation of contemporary nation states – the progressive deregulation of security and the outsourcing of state repression (Rosenbaum and Sederberg, 1974) – the French tradition of monopolizing institutions has certainly inhibited the formation of private forms of citizens justice, at least in a historical perspective. The French state in fact displays a structural tendency towards the centralization of police powers, which constitutes a strong deterrent for the development of vigilante activism.² Furthermore, unlike in other countries (such as the US), in France political actors cannot claim any historical embeddedness of this type of practice.

Still, vigilantism can also be understood as a form of collective interest articulation, or bottom-up citizen movement, emerging against the perceived inability of the state to enforce the law (Johnston, 1996; Froio and Castelli Gattinara, 2016; Pratten and Sen, 2008). Traditionally, trust in the police and in law enforcement agencies in France is very high, scoring consistently above 60% since the mid-2000s, and increasing in recent years to 80% (European Commission, 2017). In contrast, trust in government has been declining over time. Although the pattern is in line with European trends, the French public opinion displays strikingly little trust in the national government by the end of Hollande’s mandate (19% in 2015; 17% in 2016), and a steep decline in trust in local authorities (from more than 60% before 2010, to 45% in 2015). Most important to explain the motivations for vigilantism, a similar decline can be observed with respect to trust in the justice system: if in 2004 the majority expressed confidence in the French justice system (56%), this score was down to 41% in 2017.

These circumstances might facilitate the emergence of autonomous vigilante groups aiming to bypass state inefficiency in providing security and justice. It must be noted, however, that vigilantism is not conceivable without at least a minimum of social support from some specific audiences to which these actors can address their security discourse (see e.g. Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde, 1998; Balzacq, 2011). Actors articulating security discourses in response to everyday demands for security, thus, have to motivate their action on shared understandings of what constitutes a threat and what is the best way to tackle it (Doty, 2007; Huysmans, 1998). They must be able to claim that *the people* support their activities, be that for the sake of the general population or for that of specific local constituencies. This explains why the security problems that visible vigilante groups across Europe aim to tackle

systematically coincide with public priorities of security management at the state level, often linking perceived citizen insecurity to immigration and minority issues.

Even though the state does not directly participate or promote vigilantism, in fact, there is often convergence between its objectives and the ones of actors who challenge its monopoly over law enforcement (Jarman, 2008). State and non-state articulations of threat often share the same underlying logic, so that similar issues and rationales resonate across distinct understandings of societal and state security. This is most striking when it comes to the issue of migration, at the core of much research on securitization (Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde, 1998). Tensions between majority populations and minority groups, including migrants and refugees, characterize the internal politics of most European countries, creating fertile grounds for the far right, and increasing public tolerance towards vigilantism and direct engagement of citizens in solving security problems.

France has certainly not been immune to these developments. In January 2017, the presidential campaign had already begun, and the designation of candidates featured prominently on the political agenda. The political system was experiencing a deep transformation, with the demise of the two mainstream socialist and conservative parties, the emergence of a new centrist catchall party led by Emmanuel Macron, and the stabilization of populist left wing and right wing challengers. Over the previous years, the right-wing populist *Front National* (FN) acquired a remarkable influence in French politics and society, albeit without managing to get a stable representation in parliament, at least so far. The new leader Marine Le Pen opened up a process of ‘de-demonization’ of the party, taking distance from her father’s acknowledged racism and anti-Semitism with the goal of diversifying the party’s electoral audience (Mayer, 2013; Crépon, Dézé, and Mayer, 2015). Enjoying great media attention, Marine Le Pen’s agenda on migration, security and Islam (Odmalm, 2014), represents a crucial resource for far-right movements, which otherwise suffer by the presence of various laws that forbid religious, ethnic and racial discrimination, allowing the banning of anti-democratic and anti-Semitic parties.

Traditionally, the visibility of other groups on this area depends on the issue at stake. High mediatization is enjoyed by a restricted set of political movements, or networks of networks, which mobilize on secularist values and demand the exclusion of specific religious minorities, such as *Riposte Laïque* (Froio, forthcoming; Mondon, 2015). The same applies to groups that are primarily engaged in street politics but often coordinate their activities with the Front National, such as Les Identitaires. Besides these exceptional cases, however, most grassroots organizations, which may be susceptible to promoting vigilante activism, normally remain confined to subcultural milieus. The 2015–2016 terrorist attacks in Paris and Nice, however, sparked new discussions on issues related to security and the state of emergency, polarizing political debates on refugees and the place of religious signs in the public space, thus offering new opportunities for mobilization against migrants and minorities.

Vigilantism and the “refugee crisis” in France

Debates about immigration in France have been centred on issues of citizenship especially concerning the perceived “crisis of integration” of migrants from former Maghrebi colonies (Geddes and Scholten, 2016). After 2014, however, the politicization of migration witnessed a sharp twist, in response to the events connected with the Arab Spring, the Paris terror attacks, and the media portrayals of asylum seekers trying to reach the EU. This revitalized debates on two alternative conceptions of migration which were first introduced by French president Nicolas Sarkozy (Simon, 2014), according to which France must favour the “chosen” immigration (*immigration choisie* – such as highly skilled migrants) over endured immigration (*immigration subie* – such as family reunification). Furthermore, France had to cope with humanitarian and security emergencies at its borders (especially the French–Italian one), and at the entrance of the port of Calais and the nearby Eurotunnel terminal. If migrants trying to reach France from Italy found themselves stuck as France temporarily restored controls at its southern border, migrants in northern France could not pass into Britain due to the tightening of controls, which led to a dramatic increase in the population of the migrant encampment that would come to be known as the Calais “jungle”.

The French response to the refugee crisis rapidly took a highly politicized tone. While French President Francois Hollande pledged support for Europe-wide solidarity, the Front National and the French right criticized the proposal for a European quota system for asylum migrants (Geddes and Scholten, 2016). Simultaneously, the disproportionate growth of the Calais Jungle, and the deterioration of its living conditions, draw the attention of public authorities, the mass media, and NGOs in the Calais area. This ultimately triggered two forms of vigilantism that are relevant to this study. First, small groups emerged at the local level, under the initiative of citizens that grew concerned by the presence of migrants, organized via social media, and promoted activities to preserve individual safety and street security in the area of Calais. Second, organized political groups took advantage of increasing perceived insecurity to relaunch their security campaigns against migration.

Calais, its “Jungle” and its vigilantes: Les Calaisiens en Colère

In October 2013, the centre-right mayor of Calais announced the set-up of a dedicated email address, which citizens could use to report on “No-border” activists and migrants residing illegally in the city area.³ If the goal was to raise attention about the conditions in Calais, the result was to legitimize various initiatives against migrants by private citizens and grassroots organizations. In a few weeks, multiple Facebook pages appeared with the goal of organizing and coordinating citizens’ initiatives against refugees (Gardenier, 2016). The two most notable groups were *Sauvons Calais* [Let’s Save Calais] and, a few months later, *Les Calaisiens en Colère* [The Angry People of Calais, LCC].

According to its promoters, LCC is a grassroots initiative by disenfranchised citizens in Calais, with the stated purpose of responding to aggressions by migrants and the degradation in the city area due to illegal refugee settlements. Despite frequent accusations by migrant solidarity organizations, the group always proclaimed itself non-political and non-violent. Activists claim to be completely disenfranchised from any existing political organizations in France, not least the *Front National*, and they do not recognize themselves as either left or right wing (Interview FR1). In its early days, the group was active online only, giving voice to citizens to express their grievances against migrants by producing short videos and reportages about the Jungle. LCC's first street mobilization took place in October 2015, when the group organized a street march to "Stop irregular migration". The demonstration gave the group, and its narrative of "abandonment by the state", much visibility: by December 2015, the Facebook page reached 35,000 likes (at the time of the interviews, it reached 75,000).⁴

The motivations for the rally, which gathered 500/1000 people, encompass some elements of relevance to understand the emergence of citizens patrols over the following weeks:

We struggle to show you the sad reality of our everyday life, denouncing the blatant injustice that we suffer, and supporting the people who are in distress. [...] It's touching to see so many people gather here today: people who suffer here are abandoned by the state.⁵

The interviews with LCC activists confirm that individual life experiences represent a crucial motivation for getting involved in direct action, as a response to the perceived unsustainability of living conditions in Calais, and the unresponsiveness of state and local authorities.

The first group was created in 2013, under my initiative, and it was called "Let's defend Calais". I had been aggressed by an illegal migrant in 2012. I was stabbed ... I have a lifetime illness because of it. Hence, I decided to open this page to discuss my aggression and other aggressions that I heard about.

(Interview FR1)

We created a Facebook page to talk of the aggressions taking place in Calais. There have been rapes, thefts, houses have been squatted, degradation ... Some animals have been stolen, killed, eaten.

(Interview FR2)

By December 2015, LCC had already started organizing its night watch through the streets of Calais, not without raising concerns among solidarity activists and the mass media about the nature of their patrols. The stated goal of activists was to make citizens "feel safe" by offering a "presence" in the streets. The overnight patrols covered a rather wide area considered "at risk" of migrant intrusion,

including the city outskirts, the entrance of the Eurotunnel, and the main highway connecting to the border. First, LCC activists aimed at preventing migrants who could not find shelter in the Jungle, to have access to the summerhouses at the outskirts of Calais. Second, they wanted to avoid roadblocks by migrants aiming to reach into the UK. Third, they aimed at preserving security in general, against theft, violence and rapes.

After the dismantlement of the Jungle, however, LCC's vigilante strategy was partially reformulated, focusing instead on preventing the formation of new refugee campsites:

Originally, the main objective of *Les Calaisiens en Colère*, when there was the Jungle, was to avoid theft, aggressions and migrants squatting our houses ... but even more to avoid roadblocks on the highway because the life of road users was hard back then. Now, considering that the Jungle is gone, our mission is to look for the new camps and at the same time to avoid the aggressions in parking spaces on the highway.

(Interview FR1)

As far as the organizational aspects are concerned, prior to each watch, the vigilantes gathered next to the French police truck in downtown Calais. Law-enforcement agencies are the only actor with whom LCC activists acknowledge to relate, declaring to be “unofficially” in contact with the police for coordination purposes, to demand permission to access specific areas, and to call for intervention when necessary. The patrols normally took place from 20:30 to early in the morning, and the groups were composed of no more than 8–10 people, moving around by car. The interviewees report that the maximum mobilization was reached in 2015 (“when the situation had become unsustainable”, Interview FR2), with 80 persons involved in patrolling for several consecutive nights. By January 2017, the group was composed of no more than a few dozen young residents of Calais, which met irregularly and took rounds for participating in the patrols. Some of them reported working – or having worked – for private security agencies. Participants were aged 17 to 60, and they were overwhelmingly male, albeit there have been reports of women taking part in the night watches.⁶

The women are our drivers, they are our eyes. They stay inside the car while we go out in the ground. They have their eyes on our back, for our security, and they stay in touch with us with walkie-talkies, so that in case of troubles, we get out. It would be a pity to leave a man behind in the car, because he is certainly more useful on the ground than in the car.

(Interview FR1)

The patrols generally take two different forms. Normally, the vigilante group moves to a number of specific areas that they consider “at risk” of migrant intrusion, thus patrolling across different places. Occasionally, however, they can also act

in response to specific requests by private citizens, thus engaging as a private security agency, patrolling the surroundings of a house, gathering video material to send to law enforcement agencies, or directly scaring away migrants from illegal camps that formed in someone's property.

People call us, we come and we install ourselves. We tape what we see, so that we can signal it to law enforcement authorities, telling them at this address is happening this and that, you must take action.

(Interview FR2)

In the early days of their mobilization, LCC's vigilantes did not have an official dress code. Yet, the media clamour surrounding the night watches led them to wear reflective bibs with the name of the organization, to be more easily identifiable during night actions.⁷ Officially, participants are unarmed, as they might only bring a flashlight to "dissuade" migrants from pursuing illegal activities. These are allegedly "much stronger than those used by the police" and are intended to scare migrants by convincing them that vigilantes are the police. The cars also serve the same function, but from a distance. In case the abovementioned dissuasive measures are not sufficient to disperse migrants, the activists call for the intervention of the police. Even though the media has frequently reported of open confrontations between LCC activists and groups of migrants, the official position of the group concerning risks of confrontation is the opposite, as reported by one of our interviewees:

Concretely, in reality, we cannot do much if something happens: we cannot beat them up, we cannot arrest them, we can do nothing. We can only scare them, that is all.

(Interview FR1)

Two crucial concepts stand out in the analysis of vigilantism by *Les Calaisiens en Colère*: "dissuasion" as a strategy to avoid migrant criminality, and "complementarity" of vigilantism and police action. These two elements play a fundamental role in the narratives of vigilante groups; in constructing their credibility within the local community; and in legitimizing its activities. If, in fact, the motivations for engagement have to do with the feeling of abandonment by the authorities, mobilization does not aim at replacing the state in the operation of its crucial function of maintaining collective security. To the contrary, direct engagement in LCC is framed in terms of dissuasion, so that vigilantism is understood as complementary, rather than alternative, to the usual administration of law enforcement. This framing allows vigilantes to articulate mobilization without creating an overlap, or a conflict, with the role of the state as the unique holder of the monopoly of violence and the enforcement of order.

Mediatized vigilantism across France (and beyond): Les Identitaires

A well-known protagonist of the extremist right-wing scene in France are the groups inspired by the French New Right (Bar-On, 2012). We focus here on the *Bloc Identitaire* (Identitary Bloc, BI), a nativist-regionalist movement founded in 2003 by a group of sympathizers of the outlawed group *Unité Radicale* and the Front National, and on its youth organization *Génération Identitaire* (Identitary Generation, GI). While BI represents one of the main networks of right-wing street movements in France since the early 2000s (Blum, 2017), its youth section came to be known in more recent years thanks to showcase activism against Islamization, mass migration and multiculturalism, most notably the occupation of a mosque in Poitiers in 2012.

The Identitaires address primarily young generations, privileging community-building activities such as concerts, sports, collective training, and excursions. From 2016, BI has suspended all electoral activities to focus exclusively on street protest and grassroots actions, being aware that the Front National already represented the group's issues and stances in the party system. Although no official alliance was ever signed, this ultimately resulted in a "division of labour" between the two actors. Les Identitaires thus considers themselves as the "street-based" branch of Marine Le Pen's campaign. Although the FN is considerably more cautious in recognizing linkages with grassroots groups of this sort, a number of high officials of BI obtained important positions within the party.⁸ In January 2013, the GI promulgated a "declaration of war", a video in which it expresses its ideological antagonism to Europe's multicultural society (Génération Identitaire, 2013). The video has been translated in various languages, so that today the symbols and colours of the Identitaires have become a brand identity for spin-off groups in Austria, Italy, the Netherlands, Switzerland and Czech Republic (Blum, 2017).

The *Identitaires* promote numerous anti-immigration initiatives, including vigilante actions. First, they organize the so-called "Anti-Scum" patrols (*Génération anti-Racaille*), which are part of a broader set of actions aimed at convincing the French people to "defend themselves" against insecurity (Génération Identitaire, 2014). These actions mainly focus on securitizing public transport, but parallel initiatives include training courses in self-defence, legal assistance for victims of violence, and courses targeting specifically high school students. Although the framing of the actions focuses on all types of criminal activities, their main target are migrants and religious minorities in France, in line with the broader political activity of the group.

The objective was to show to public transport users that there is a youth that promotes solidarity and self-defence against insecurity caused by those scum and the resignation of the police. We also wish to challenge the candidates for mayor of Lyon on the theme of insecurity in transport. Awareness, prevention and deterrence are the watchwords of this action.

(*Génération Identitaire*, 2014)

A group of militants go on public transport and simply take care that everything goes fine. [...] Our goal is to avoid problems, rather than causing them. Our objective is prevention.

(Interview FR3)

The campaigns are promoted by the Bloc Identitaire, but delegated to local militants in charge of participating, gathering supporters and managing the logistics. The usual format involves 10 to 20 voluntary activists, who jump on trains and metro lines considered “dangerous”, and distribute flyers to passengers. The underlying logic is that the militants remain on the train until the last stop, so that their presence makes sure that nothing happens during the transit. The distribution of flyers has two functions: on the one hand, it works as propaganda for the group, making its mission and symbol visible among a broader audience and potential supporters. On the other, it is a protective measure against legal sanctions. While the promoters do not act in coordination with police, they nevertheless make sure that their activities are within the boundaries of the law (such as leaflet distribution by small groups), or they ask for prior authorization for some form of standardized political activity.

Sometimes they distribute flyers to passengers to make them aware and to inform them that if they witnessed something that is not normal, they could call a given number. To tell them that we are there in support of the police and not to replace it.

(Interview FR3)

Participants are not armed and they do not wear official uniforms, but they make sure to be recognizable by wearing reflective bibs with the logo of the Identitaires. The branding of the action and the immediate recognizability of the promoters fits well with the broader strategy of the group. Vigilantism, in fact, does not represent only a form of direct social activism aimed at offering a concrete, material, solution to an urgent problem. Rather, it also helps presenting the group as crucially different from actors engaged in traditional forms of protest addressing third parties (e.g. the state, the media), and demanding their mediation for the solution of a public problem. This is the same logic driving the groups’ solidarity actions:

This is also the theme of what we call “Génération Solidaire”: every winter, the Identitaires take on the streets throughout France to distribute soups, warm clothes and other goods to homeless people from Europe. That’s because migrants are already hosted by the State in relatively luxurious centres, while native-born French have to sleep in the streets.

(Interview FR3)

By means of vigilante engagement, the Identitaires invest in direct engagement against something perceived as dysfunctional, in this case migration and insecurity.

Furthermore, the patrols also serve the function of promoting the “identitarian brand” and its activities. The promoters of these campaigns, in fact, try to maximize the media impact of their actions, through the careful selection of colours and symbols, and through the staging and – when possible – the spectacularization of protest. Mediatized vigilantism also relates to the broader agenda setting strategy of the Identitarians.⁹

This second nature of vigilantism also emerges from another campaign by the Identitaires: *Defend Europe*. Launched in 2017, this campaign aimed at setting up a search-and rescue mission, documenting the misbehaviour of NGOs in the Libyan coast, and hampering their cooperation with human smugglers (Defend Europe, 2017). The idea originated in the network of the French *Génération Identitaire*, in cooperation with its affiliated groups across Europe. Together, they raised about €75,000 through web-based crowdfunding, and used it to hire a vessel and a crew, and set sail to the Mediterranean Sea. The campaign offers a straightforward example of the mediatized logics of vigilantism, as it combines the ambition of setting up a patrol, with the media-oriented spirit that drives much of the Identitarians’ politics. Indeed, Defend Europe was presented using typical narratives of direct activism, such as the need to act “here and now”, and the desire of acting on behalf of law enforcement agencies, offering the citizenry a service that the state is either unable, or unwilling, to fulfil. In this respect, the logic is the same as in night watches and vigilante squads: the Mediterranean patrol is understood as the functional equivalent of the building-up of a wall, with the goal of dissuading the pursuit of illegal migration to Europe.

At the same time, the Defend Europe promoters had very clear in mind that the real objective of the mission was in the media, rather than at sea. The action does not exclusively address migrants, but also the media system, with the goal of breaking the mainstream consensus concerning “search and rescue” operations and the role of NGOs in the Mediterranean. Activists thus engage in patrolling, but also in reporting with video and pictures the reality about immigration to Europe, offering alternative material and uncovering the collusion between the NGOs and human smugglers.

The main Goal of DEFEND EUROPE is to reveal the outrageous activities of NGOs to the entire world.

(Defend Europe, 2017)

The promoters of Defend Europe claimed numerous victories while sealing in the Mediterranean, as they considered that their presence, their documentation activity, and their patrols, not only inhibited NGOs by unveiling their alleged criminal actions, but also set in motion a number of reactions, especially in Italian politics. Most notably, Defend Europe campaigners took credit for the Italian government’s choice to threaten to shut its ports to NGOs who failed to sign to a controversial code of conduct implying, among other things, that the Italian army would be allowed to accompany the rescue missions. It is true, indeed, that by the

end of the summer numerous humanitarian NGOs had withdrawn their ships, in disagreement with the code of conduct. Similarly, it is undeniable that the Italian executive endorsed the tenets of a prominent xenophobic conspiracy theory, insinuating that NGOs act in cooperation with human smugglers. Whether this can be linked to the concrete activity of Defend Europe, however, is more questionable. As a matter of fact, the vessel ultimately spent only a week monitoring the sea by Libya. The anti-immigrant vessel had to cope with a number of problems: first, they were denied the docking rights in Sicily, after mounting clamour by local anti-racist movements; then, they had to renounce refuelling in Greece and Tunisia, because of local opposition; finally, having failed to provide a satisfactory crew list, the vessel was stopped in the Suez Canal. Some crew members were ultimately arrested in Northern Cyprus over people smuggling allegations, and subsequently released on the claim that crew members on board were apprentice sailors.¹⁰

In this sense, Defend Europe configured a performative action, based on a specific mix of agenda setting and direct activism logics. The group hailed the action “a political success, a media success, and a success in activism” (Defend Europe, 2017), because of its indirect impact via the mass media, as well as its direct impact on the management of search and rescue missions:

Defend Europe has received an enormous amount of media coverage. While almost all were hostile, and several were lying, these articles and TV reports brought our action to the minds of millions of people. It is this media impact which allowed our political success. Only two months ago, many NGO ships were cruising near Libyan coasts like taxis waiting for their customers. Right now, the 20th of August, there's only one left.

(Defend Europe, 2017)

In sum, vigilantism by the Identitarian movement shows that some of the motivational elements in their direct campaigning are common to previously observed vigilante practices, such as the perception of unresponsiveness by state authorities and the perceived inefficiency of law enforcement agency. Similarly, the main focus is on how to prevent and deter violence and insecurity, which resonates with the previous discussion on vigilantism as a form of dissuasion. Yet, the rationale is remarkably different, in that the logic is not one of direct engagement by citizens that aim at solving “here” and “now” a critical situation or problem, but rather that of staging a display to the public and the mass media. In this sense, the logic is much closer to the media-oriented agenda setting practice of social movements than to one of direct activism and vigilantism.

Concluding remarks

This chapter analysed vigilantism understood as acts of coercion in defence of an established political order, albeit in violation of its formal boundaries of security

enforcement and rule of law. It focused on the vastly understudied context of France, where vigilante experiences can count on virtually no historical embeddedness, and have to cope with a strong state tradition of centralization of police powers. Despite these structural constraints to vigilante mobilization, it showed how declining faith in law enforcement agencies and state institutions has facilitated some episodic experiences by groups of individuals that have tried to take the law in their own hands. Empirically, the chapter thus focused on the case of the Calaisiens en Colère and the Identitarian movement, with a special focus on anti-refugee and anti-migrant mobilization. In so doing, it showed that vigilante practices represent a viable strategy for different types of groups in contemporary France, paving the way not only for disenfranchised grassroots campaigns by local citizens, but also for organized political initiatives by more established far right organizations.

As was discussed, there are a number of common features to the very different vigilante practices set forth by the two groups under observation. Most notably, in both cases the underlying rationale is that vigilantism is made necessary by the state's inability and unwillingness to fulfil its duties towards citizens. The feeling of "abandonment" by the state, and the critique to the establishment, however, does not go as far as to promote activities intended to replace the state function of ensuring security. In all circumstances, vigilantes avoid running the risk of creating a conflict between their practices and the state as the unique holder of the monopoly of violence. To the contrary, the logic is the one of "complementarity" and "dissuasion", so that direct activism enables citizens to engage on urgent problems in support of police action, so that vigilantism is promoted as complementary to the usual administration of law enforcement by the state.

Some differences between various approaches to vigilantism emerge, however, if we compare the practices by grassroots citizen groups and organized political movements. Only the latter, in fact, have successfully combined the strategies of direct activism with the logics of agenda setting. The Identitarian movement seems to be interested in vigilantism primarily because it enables a to bridge between the logics of direct engagement aimed at solving "here" and "now" a situation perceived as critical, with a mediatized understanding of contentious politics. In this respect, vigilante activities are not much about providing a material answer to a problem. As shown by the Defend Europe campaign, vigilantism often configures a staged performance, by which anti-immigrant actors try to impose a certain scenario to attract the attention of the public and the mass media. Rather than vigilante actions, thus, these events represent vigilante performances. This might explain why vigilantism is often so appealing to relatively small and weak far-right street movements: because it allows them to invest simultaneously in audiences at the local level (in the territories where they engage), as well as at the national and transnational level (thanks to the media resonance of vigilante performances).

Notes

- 1 L. Leroux, *Le Monde*, 13 August 2008: Les Roms de Marseille En Butte À Une Vague D'hostilité.
- 2 As a matter of fact, all forms of “private militias” have been forbidden in France for a long time. The law of 10 January 1936, subsequently abrogated and reiterated in the Article L212–1 in 2012, allows the French state to dissolve by decree all associations or groups who “by their military form and organization, have the character of combat groups or private militia” or “whose activity tends to defeat measures concerning the reestablishment of republican legality”. <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichCode.do?idSectionTA=LEGISCTA000025508340&cidTexte=LEGITEXT000025503132>.
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