



## Media Portrayals of Protests

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### A Discursive Analysis of Newspaper Articles on *Gilet Jaune* protests in France

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VT 2019

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## Abstract

The way conflicts are understood depends on how identities are conveyed through media. Newspapers' reports of the *Gilet Jaune* protests in France during the autumn 2018 are no exception. One factor that can influence which choices are made in describing identity, is the distance between the place of publication and the location of events. Articles from *Le Figaro* and *The Times* are analysed using discourse theory and methods based on the work of Laclau and Mouffe. This creates an understanding of the way distance influences how identities are communicated. Identities and phenomena with major roles in the articles include "the Gilets Jaunes", "Macron" and "Social Media". The words chosen to signify them reveal whether their designated position in the discourse, as well as potential antagonisms or changes to identity. While both newspapers mention similar aspects of the protests, they are understood as part of a French political discourse through the articles of *The Times*, mainly due to their focus on Macron's identity, whereas in *Le Figaro*, the protests are more often compared to populist movements in other countries. This incorporates the *Gilet Jaune* protests in a contemporary global discourse concerning populism. Consequently, this can be understood as an effect of dislocation of current hegemonic discourse in both countries, causing newspapers to externalise the revolts to discourses not concerning the country of publication.

Key words: Populism, Social Media, Journalism, Identity, French Democracy

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## 2. Introduction

In November 2018, traffic jams and cancelled public transport raised havoc in many parts of France. Roads and streets were blocked by crowds of people wearing neon yellow vests. Metro stations were closed and evacuated, universities blocked, tear gas spread over squares by angry-looking riot police facing angry-looking protesters. Soon, French and international media was filled with reports on the tumult and its cause; raised petrol taxes. These uprisings have not only come to affect daily life in France but also the politics of an outspokenly pro-European President. The yellow vest protests (*Gilet Jaune* in French) are some of the largest and longest ones in recent years, which may have both direct or indirect consequences on international political organisations and movements, not least concerning our ability to reach both social and environmental goals.

The *Gilet Jaune* protests can be placed in both a contemporary and a historical context; the protests bring to mind the supposedly strong though rather stereotypical French “tradition” of protesting, historically seen in the 1789 French Revolution and the student protests of 1968. Additionally, the protests can easily be compared to the rising wave of populism in a previously stable “West” as seen through for example Trump’s victory and Brexit. The surrounding contexts influence our understanding of who the *Gilets Jaunes* are, what or who they are protesting against and why this is happening in the first place. Aside from speaking *vis-à-vis*, the media has a central role in spreading these ideas among people. Social media has a particular role in spreading social movements, as seen during the Arab Spring, #MeToo and now with the *Gilets Jaunes*. The benefit - and drawback - of social media is that emotions are made collective very quickly. Traditional media, such as physical newspapers, lack this immediacy. Giving them the impression of being more consistent and therefore more trustworthy. That physical newspapers are also angled is hardly news, but this angle tends to be more subtle in less fanatic forms of media.

Many factors affect the choice of context through which newspaper articles convey conflicts. This affects how we perceive roles that individuals or groups assume. Using discourse theory and method that focuses on identity allows linguistic structures to be analysed and the effects these have on perception to be understood. This is important in order to understand how traditional media affects our perception of events going on around us - such as the *Gilet Jaunes*.

When it comes to international news, the place of publication and its relation to the place of events can specifically affect the discourse, depending on geographical, historical or cultural factors. The UK and France are both currently facing populist movements, but the identities assigned to individuals and groups connected to the *Gilet Jaune* conflict are sure to vary because of these factors. In studying six articles from *The Times* and six from *Le Figaro*, these differences in discourse are brought to attention and the effects they have on our understanding of both the *Gilet Jaune* conflict and the newspapers themselves can be identified.

## 2.1. Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to understand the ways relevant identities in the conflict between *Gilet Jaune* protestors and the French government were presented to readers of *The Times* and *Le Figaro* during the beginning of the uprising. Presumably, geographical and cultural distance between the newspaper and the conflict will influence the groups' discursive identities, with the French newspaper conveying a more nuanced understanding of the protests than the British one. This paper will examine if this is the case, and if so, investigate what might cause these differences. The study is a critical one, but not a political one, and therefore I am critical of all present identities.

Therefore, my research questions are:

- 1) How do discursive choices in *The Times* and *The Figaro* influence perception of key identities related to the *Gilet Jaune* protests?
- 2) In which way do these differences indicate the role that the distance between the place of publishing and the location of events has upon the discourse?

## 2.2 Limitations

The study's focus lies on discursive differences on an international level, examined through the analysis of the newspaper with the most readers in each country<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, discursive differences between French newspapers that differ politically or regionally will not be taken into account. The sample of articles studied from *The Times* and *Le Figaro* are not exhaustive, but representative of the type of articles found. This should not affect the results, as "the success of a study is not in the least dependent on sample size" as language use rather than the people using the language is studied and "linguistic patterns are likely to emerge"<sup>2</sup>.

## 2.3 Disposition

As the *Gilet Jaune* protests are recent and still ongoing, there is little currently published research. However, a survey studying protesters' social backgrounds will be presented. Following this, this study's use of Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory and methodology is specified and explained. The newspapers that the studied articles are published in after this. Major identities found in articles along with their signifiers are presented in a table, after which these identities and moments are analysed using methods based on Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory. Main differences between the newspapers' discourses will also be discussed. To conclude, the final analytical results are related to the research questions. Lastly, the relevance of this study as well as possible areas of future research is suggested.

## 3. Previous Research

As the protests are very recent, there are few currently published academic studies concerning the movement. Most information distributed about the movement is shared through media. However, a study led by a group of sociologists, political scientists and geographers and first published in *Le Monde* (and translated by David Fernbach) states that based on a study of 166 questionnaires between the 24th November and 1st December,

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<sup>1</sup> L'Alliance pour les Chiffres de la Presse et des Médias,  
Katrin Kienast

<sup>2</sup> Potter and Wetherell, *Discourse and Social Psychology* p. 161,  
Titscher, Meyer et al. *Methods of Text and Discourse Analysis* p.42

“While there is no typical profile for the demonstrators, one of the characteristics of the movement being its diversity, the Gilets Jaunes are first and foremost men and women who work (or are retired from work), aged 45 on average, belonging to the working-class or the ‘lower’ middle class.”

The statistical results of Bedock et al.s’ research are presented in figures 1.1 & 1.2 below:

Figure 1.1

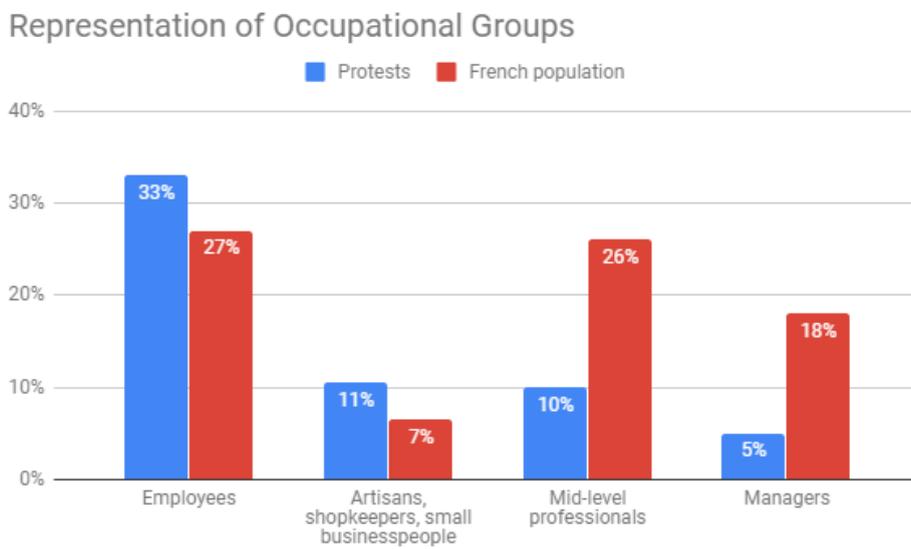
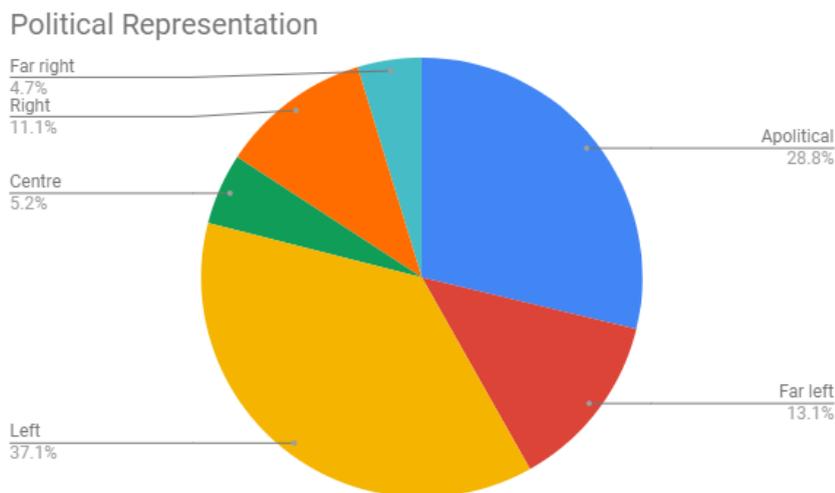


Figure 1.2



The study points to most participants belonging to financially modest households, yet not the most economically vulnerable ones. The study also saw a rejection of traditional representation; 81% were distanced from political parties.

When asked on motives, this study found that rather than protesting the specific petrol tax, most people were against “tax and benefits system considered unfair.” Other mentioned reasons to protest were to acquire power, to demonstrate their economic struggles to politicians, to protest excessive tax burdens, to protest Macron’s government and call for his resignation. When asked how the government ought to respond to the protests, answers such as cut taxes, increase citizens power, increase the minimum wage, purchasing power and pensions, redistribute wealth, listen to the citizens and complete institutional change<sup>3</sup>.

My analysis will be qualitative, not quantitative, so these statistical descriptions will only be used as a reference point to compare with my analysis of *The Times* and *Le Figaro*’s discourse. Comparing this study with previous research will demonstrate how the studied discourses continue or change, which makes this research become part of a larger discourse. My results will also add another perspective to the statistics presented here; whether the way the *Gilets Jaunes* are described in conservative press aligns with or contradicts the *Gilets Jaunes*’ self-perception.

#### 4. Theoretical and methodological framework

In order to study the identities involved in the *Gilet Jaune* movement and how these are constructed and conveyed through *The Times* and *Le Figaro*, the selected articles are analysed using theoretical and methodological concepts from Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory. In the following section, the theoretical background and purpose of discourse are explained. Following this, the use of the concept “identity” is clarified. After this section, methodological concepts used to analyse meaning and identity are defined. Following an explanation of the concept *Dislocation*, the use of comparative method and reflexivity in this study is presented. Finally, the methodological plan of the analysis is proposed.

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<sup>3</sup> Bedock, Gremion, de Raymond et al., “Gilets jaunes » : une enquête pionnière sur la « révolte des revenus modestes”, *Le Monde*, December 11 2018

Bedock, Gremion, de Raymond et al., translated by David Fernbach. *Gilets jaunes: a pioneering study of the ‘low earners’ revolt*, Versobooks, December 14 2018

#### 4.1. Theoretical background and purpose

The purpose of this study is to understand how individual and group identities involved in the *Gilet Jaune* movement are conveyed through newspapers from France and the UK. The discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe is especially appropriate when analysing identity, as one of its strengths is its ability to explain “the complexity of identities and meaning”<sup>4</sup>. Discourse means “discussion” and refers to “the structured totality resulting from” communication<sup>5</sup>. It is a critical theory originating from linguistic Structuralism and Hermeneutics, drawing from and critiquing Marxism<sup>6</sup>. In the words of Laclau and Mouffe, “discourse theory aims at an understanding of the social as a discursive construction whereby, in principle, all social phenomena can be analysed using discourse analytical tools”<sup>7</sup>. While Fairclough’s Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is often used to analyse media, CDA has a different purpose; to critically analyse power structures<sup>8</sup>. In this case, the study will not assess whether the media has portrayed politicians or protesters in a fair way concerning power structures, but rather to investigate how identities are conveyed. Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory has limitations, however. Using it, “there is still room for “objective” (...) explanations” and explanations related to ideology. As identity and meaning are considered relative, the *use* of elements, not their actual definition is considered, so relativism can become a problem<sup>9</sup>.

#### 4.2. Identity in Discourse Theory

In this theory, the meaning of moments and identities can never be fixed. Language is considered a social practice, as we place signs in different relations to each other through communication, constantly “shaping and reshaping” meaning<sup>10</sup>. Instead, discourse analysis maps out the portrayal of and changes to social identity and phenomena.

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<sup>4</sup> Torney, Simon and Jules Townshend, *Laclau and Mouffe: Towards a Radical Democratic Imagery* p. 111

<sup>5</sup> Laclau, Ernesto and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and socialist strategy* p. 91

<sup>6</sup> Bergström and Boréus, *Textens Mening och Makt* p. 367- 369

Torney and Townshend, p. 94 - 96

<sup>7</sup> Jorgensen and Phillips, *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method* p. 28

<sup>8</sup> Bergström and Boréus, *Textens Mening och Makt*, “Diskursanalys” p. 353 - 415

<sup>9</sup> Torney and Townshend p. 111

<sup>10</sup> Bergström, Göran & Kristina Boréus p. 364

Howarth, David and Jacob Torfing, “Discourse Theory” in *Discourse Theory in European Politics*, p. 14

Laclau and Mouffe argue that identity is perceived according to “the same principles as discursive processes”. Therefore, identity is always fragmented. Each discourse designates a position for an identity, which “becomes a type of filter through which the world is perceived”. People can take on several roles within one discourse (ie. student, protester) but also several roles across several discourses (ie. protester, headteacher). Often, these different roles do not conflict with each other, but if they do, the identity can become *overdetermined* by the most dominant identity. Identity can be accepted, refused or negotiated within different discourses. Therefore identity, according to Laclau and Mouffe is entirely social, *not* an individual inner core and *not* determined by ideology<sup>11</sup>.

#### 4.3 Concepts used methodologically to analyse meaning

Rather than determining a fixed meaning, discourse theory is used to determine struggles in defining meaning. In order to map out these struggles in the chosen articles, the following concepts are used: *elements*, *moments*, *closure*, *chains of equivalence*, *chains of difference*, *nodal points*, *the field of discursivity*, *floating signifiers* and *myths*. These concepts are defined in the sections below.

*Elements* refer to “the signs whose meanings have not yet been fixed”, or “not discursively articulated”. Discourse reduces elements to *moments*, that is a differential position that has a momentarily fixed meaning. This process is referred to as *closure*. Some moments can be considered *nodal points*, the centre of the discourse. All elements can be connected to the nodal point and given a partially fixed meaning through this connection. Arguably, without the nodal point, the discourse could not exist. For instance, in the upcoming analysis, an example of a nodal point could be “globalisation”; all signs (yellow vests, protests, inequality) can be connected to “globalisation” and it is hard to imagine a discourse concerning the *Gilets Jaunes* without it.

By relating moments to one another, *chains of equivalence* are created. These describe what the *nodal point* is, and *chains of difference* describe what the *nodal point* is not, giving the discourse meaning. A discourse therefore consists of a series of combinations and choices

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<sup>11</sup> Jorgensen, Marianne W, and Phillips, Louise, p. 45-47  
Laclau and Mouffe p. 91  
Tormey, Simon and Jules Townshend, p. 95

that temporarily create, alter, reproduce or exclude meaning. Excluded meanings of elements are found in the *field of discursivity*. An example of this could be cyclists' use of reflective vests for safety. The field of discursivity is never permanently irrelevant, as it can still affect the current discourse's way of conveying meaning. By placing the moment in new contexts, its meaning can be renewed. So for example, if a cyclist with a reflective vest should find themselves in the middle of a *Gilet Jaune* protest, this meaning could once again become relevant. *Floating signifiers* are elements that are "especially open to different interpretations" and especially likely to be found in the field of discursivity. They refer to "the ongoing struggle between different discourses to fix the meaning of important signs" and can indicate *antagonism*, explained in the next section<sup>12</sup>. Yellow vests used both to protest raised fuel taxes and for cyclists' safety is an example of a floating signifier.

#### 4.4. Concepts used methodologically to analyse identity

Struggles concerning identities are analysed using the terms *signifiers*, *master signifiers*, *antagonism* and *hegemonic intervention*. *Signifiers* are elements that describe identity. *Master Signifiers* are the signifiers that people identify with above any other signifier. By linking signifiers together, *chains of equivalence* and *difference* are created, resulting in a relative identity. Identity is therefore a relational "cluster of signifiers" with one nodal point, the master signifier. An *antagonism* is "when different discourses (collide and) mutually exclude each other," meaning that an identities are designated two opposing positions in the discourse and through this, given identity<sup>13</sup>. An example of this could be our cyclist found in the middle of a yellow vest protest, who despite following the dress code, would not identify as part of the protests, being pro- fuel taxes. It is argued that similarities between identities can only be revealed through antagonism, or being placed in contrast to something they are different from. Antagonisms stabilize prevailing discourses, but, indicating difference, prevent their permanent closure<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> Bergström and Boréus p.365 - 367  
Howarth and Torfing, p. 14 - 17

Laclau and Mouffe p. 91

Jørgensen and Phillips p. 29 - 35

<sup>13</sup> Jørgensen and Phillips p. 49- 52

Tormey and Townshend, p. 94 - 97

<sup>14</sup> Howarth and Torfing, p. 14 - 17

Tormey and Townshend, p. 94 - 97

As no discourses can be at constant closure, they are more or less always conflicting one another. Floating signifiers and antagonism can be fixed by *hegemonic intervention*: when dominant societal norms form the discourse without being challenged. Like closure, this results in “a new fixation of meaning”. For instance, if the cyclist asks the protestors “if you’re so angry about fuel taxes, why don’t you just take the metro?”, this would be an example of metropolitan hegemonic discourse, as it assumes that the underground goes everywhere.

Group formation and identity are described in similar ways. While individuals have several different identities that they can choose from, group formations essentially means a reduction of possible identity choices for participating individuals. When forming groups, certain identities are considered relevant and therefore included, while others are rejected. This establishes chains of equivalence and difference within the group. Creating community by rejecting certain identities means that groups often define themselves by what they are not<sup>15</sup>.

#### 4.5. Dislocation

Dislocation occurs when the previously stable hegemonic discourse starts to collapse. This can happen if it faces moments or identities which cannot be integrated into or explained by the discourse, that is to say if meanings rejected to the field of discursivity return. This can result in “structural or organisational crisis” and increased use of floating signifiers. If the previous structures that explain the world become disrupted, identities formed by the discourse start to split, lacking a complete identity, as the discourse that used to define it is no longer fully there. Attempting to create the illusion of full identity, this lack might either disintegrate the identity, or else become externalised, becoming “political action (...) driven by an illusionary promise: that the elimination of the other will remove the subject’s original lack.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Bergström and Boréus p. 273 + 371  
Tormey and Townshend, p. 94 - 97

Jørgensen and Phillips p.49- 52  
<sup>16</sup> Howarth and Torfing, p. 14 - 17

#### 4.6. Comparison

According to Jörgenson and Phillips, “The simplest way of building an impression of the nature of a text is to compare it with other texts” as statements gain “meaning through being different from something else”. The purpose of comparing texts is to reveal the consequences of differences between the texts and to see which similarities are “taken for granted”. A way to describe more precisely how identities are created is to compare two texts where one would expect different identities to be formed, such as British and French articles about French protests<sup>17</sup>. The nationality of the newspaper is the only independent variable of this study, therefore any differing results between the newspapers will depend on this factor. All articles will be weighted equally in the analysis, which will be organised point -by -point (or rather, identity -by -identity) as many of the articles from the two newspapers cover similar topics.

#### 4.7 Reflexivity

Finally, although the purpose of discourse analysis is to distance oneself from the discourses and deconstruct them, we are all encompassed by discursive structures. If everything is considered discursive, then any analysis of discourse is in itself discursive. By analysing reflexively, however, this difficulty can be taken into account<sup>18</sup>. Reflexive practice reveals the discourses we find ourselves in and can explain why we interpret certain discourses the way we do. In reflexively explaining the conditions that this analysis is produced in, a more complete picture will be conveyed.

#### 4.8. Methodological Outline

In the comparison, the previously explained discursive concepts will be identified and analysed in order to map out struggles regarding identity and meaning in the source material. The analysis will be structured as follows:

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<sup>17</sup> Jørgensen and Phillips p. 122- 123  
Walk 1998

<sup>18</sup> Jørgensen and Phillips p. 53

- 1) Identities, moments, signifiers and master signifiers detected in *Le Figaro* and *The Times* are presented in a table, to create an overview of relevant elements
- 2) The elements linked to each major identity or moment are analysed to reveal conflict, antagonisms, hegemonic interventions, floating signifiers, chains of equivalence or chains of difference, as these influence our understanding of relevant identities. Differences or similarities between the discourses of *Le Figaro* and *The Times*, concerning the perception of identities and moments, are discussed.
- 3) The findings of this analysis will be reflexively considered and compared to the statistics from Bedock et al.'s study.

These steps allow for the analysis of the perception of participants of the *Gilet Jaune* conflict. This will indicate whether or not there are significant differences between the French and British discourses in major conservative newspapers regarding identities of the *Gilets Jaunes*.

## 5. Empirical Material

Six articles from *The Times* and six from *Le Figaro* form the study material. The articles were published during the start of the uprising between 16/11/2018 and 11/12/2018. All articles are analytical texts, chosen for having these features. *The Times* and *Le Figaro* have been chosen as sources for the study material as they are both the largest daily non-tabloid newspapers<sup>19</sup>. Both are nationally distributed conservative newspapers and can therefore be compared to find differences only depending on distance. The analysis of these articles will focus on the perception of discursive identities relevant to the protests, and similarities and differences between the newspapers' discourses.

### 5.1. *Le Figaro*

*Le Figaro* was founded in 1826 and by 1866 it had become one of the largest political newspapers in France. During the Nazi occupation of France, unlike other French

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<sup>19</sup> L'Alliance pour les Chiffres de la Presse et des Médias,  
Katrin Kienast

newspapers, *Le Figaro* was closed down to be revived after the war, which meant that the newspaper has become the largest daily newspaper in France<sup>20</sup>. The articles analysed from *Le Figaro* were published between the 16th November – 11<sup>th</sup> December.

### 5.2. *The Times*

*The Times* was founded in 1785, as the *Daily Universal Register* and by 1817 it had developed into a “strong independent newspaper” with a large circulation. According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica, “it was also seen as the very epitome of the British establishment”. Today the newspaper is part of Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation<sup>21</sup>. The articles analysed from *The Times* were published between the 21<sup>st</sup> November to 11<sup>th</sup> December.

## 6. Results

The main identities and moments located in the articles are placed in the table below. If a master signifier has been possible to identify through being clearly more emphasized than other signifiers, or through having the purpose of defining the role of the identity or moment in the discourse, this is added. Most identities occur in both *The Times* and *The Figaro*, in which case they are described in the first table. The relevant signifiers are categorised article by article in chronological order so that the signifiers can easily be located in the original articles. Identities that are only found in one newspaper are presented in separate tables below, otherwise exactly as in the first table; this division is for layout purposes only. Abbreviations are also used for this reason; GJ stands for *Gilets Jaunes*, LREM is *La République en Marche*, govt is short for the government and RN is the *Rassemblement National*. It is important to understand that individual names such as Macron or Thatcher do not refer to these individuals, but to the position they possess in the discourse. Calling them “Macron” and “Thatcher” is thereby symbolic, referring to what they represent.

Signifiers The Times	Signifiers Le Figaro
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<sup>20</sup> The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, “Le Figaro”, August 17 2017

<sup>21</sup> The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, “The Times”, June 27 2019

<u>Les Gilets Jaunes</u>	<u>Master signifier: Anti- Establishment</u>
<p>21.11.2018</p> <p>Yellow safety vest, La France Périphérique, forgotten France, countryside, small towns,</p>	<p>16.11.2018</p> <p>Contemporary poujadism, stains their image?, protests against economic stress, conviction that the future is dismal, feelings from the past, central socio -professional categories</p>
<p>3.12.2018</p> <p>professional far-right, nationalists, anarchist, insurrectional, violent, hardcore, rioters, casseurs, thugs, leaderless, “moderate”, referendums, fuel tax rises, rise in the minimum wage, popular uprising</p>	<p>19.11.2018</p> <p>Completely without political parties or trade unions, <b>very large geographical spread</b>, mobilisation of <i>la France périphérique</i>, petrol prices, outskirts of major cities, where most residents are “commuters”, roundabouts, commercial zones, major traffic routes, densely populated, extreme sensitivity to petrol taxes, <b>primary places of movement, more political logic</b>, anti- Macron tone, fewer points of action, areas where many voted for Macron, important mobilisation in certain “Frontist” strongholds, strong support of the RN amongst the GJ.</p>
<p>4.12.2018</p> <p>anti- tax revolt, full -blown revolution, ultra- right militants, extremists, worst rioting in Paris since 1968 (x2), far -left activists, barricades, fire, cars, buildings, attacked police, well organised, no known political affiliation, political conscience, overthrow the entire system, chaos, anti-immigrant agenda, nationalists, radical ecologists, initially reluctant, anarchists, collapse of the state, punch- up.</p>	<p>20.11.2018</p> <p>the established, voting ballots, without structure or organisation, a spectacular demonstration of strength, error - a simple rebellion, phenomenon blown up by the media, skin- deep reaction to carbon taxes to which the govt can resolve with just adjustments, authors, La France périphérique, la France des métropoles, from somewhere, from anywhere, the British situation, global character, current revolt of the people against the globalised society, the end of the Western middle class</p>
<p>5.12.2018</p> <p>Emboldened, success, new distribution of wealth, shops were looted, cars were burnt, school pupils, buildings set on fire, clashes with police, schools were blockaded, outside major towns, reasonable supporters, extremists</p>	<p>23.11.2018</p> <p>-</p>

<p>7.12.2018</p> <p>Terrible upheaval, mid- November, from nowhere, concerns about a complacent elite</p>	<p>6.12.2018</p> <p>multifaceted, spontaneous, grassroots movement, complaints, sprang like a cry from the heart of the country, unease, globalisation, immigration, feeling invisible, make ends meet by the end of the month, avoid the end of the world, let their leaders know that the Revolution is still part of the French equation, must not be caught by radicals</p>
<p>11.12.2018</p> <p>Marine le Pen, Fuel tax rise, scrapping of a wealth tax, la France périphérique, stagnation in living standards, these people are French, for god's sake, this is what they do, ineffable Frenchness</p>	<p>11.12.2018</p> <p>Yellow fever, Netoyen, La France en Colère, haphazard demands, lowered taxes, suppressed subventions to press, raised minimum wage, <b>citizens referendum, direct democracy</b>, democratic &gt; social / political, #MeToo of the working class, revealing what was swept under the carpet, short -circuiting, unfavourable media and institutions, parties and trade unions, radicalisation, smothering moderate voices, encouraging lynching, danger for democracy, tyranny of the majority</p>
<p><b><u>Macron + supporters</u></b></p>	<p><b><u>The President of France</u></b></p>
<p>21.11.2018</p> <p>Young Urbanites, 16 month old fan- club, start- up party</p> <p>King, Monarch, outsider, anomaly, debutant, arrogant, President of the rich, secretive, former banker/ civil servant, Continent's leader of resistance to the populist tide, wanted to rule like Jupiter</p>	<p>20.11.2018</p> <p>Surprise victory of Macron, France could be the exception, anti-system movements</p>
<p>5.12.2018</p> <p>Caves in, Buckled, rejected by protestors, humiliating retreat, acted too late, provoking contempt, deaf ear to a mutiny, intransigence, low profile, unpopularity,</p>	<p>23.11.2018</p> <p>Between l'Élysée and the streets there is nothing, executive power, anaemic, raised petrol taxes, hard to justify, can we still govern our country today? end up on his knees, perfect dignity, crucial subjects, secondary and derisory, Margaret Thatcher's suppression of free milk for school children, weakness of French democratic culture</p>

<p>7.12.2018</p> <p>Emperor, grandiose speeches, avoid the sack, embarrassing, slayer of populism, supposedly mighty reformer, would never back down, backed down, boundlessly overconfident, Jupiter, darling, liberal parts of the media, progressive potential messiah, tragedy, correct, trainee emperor posing as a great reformer, knows it all, Margaret Thatcher in reverse, defeat, shredding authority, out of office, hubristic state of mind, denouncing nationalism, imperial</p>	<p>6.12.2018</p> <p>Sock puppet of the elite and the old regime, Western elites, crazy about him, young King, so French, so talented, so well mannered, save Europe, why not the West, the international system and the liberal order from the claws of new tyrants, make the planet great again, antidote and counterpower, “America first”, traditional parties retire, claimed to be anti-system, reform the country, globalisation, a feat, judges by Europe, does not see the problems of his own people, establishment, never wanted to destroy, represent</p>
<p>11.12.2018</p> <p>Sometimes very, very annoying, the annoyingness of Emmanuel Macron</p>	<p>11.12.2018</p> <p>Used social media at the expense of intermediate bodies and traditional parties, enthusiasm, technology, direct democracy, too univalent speech, failing representation.</p>
<p><b><u>Thatcher</u></b></p>	<p><b><u>Britain’s former Prime Minister</u></b></p>
<p>7.12.2018</p> <p>Great reformer, built steadily, slow start, learning as she went, listening to the best advice, conceding, self- doubt, imperial complex</p>	<p>23.11.2018</p> <p>Suppression of free milk for school children, secondary, derisory, future Iron lady, humiliation, lesson, never again retreat, the “lutteuse”, focus, the essential</p>
<p><b><u>Brexit</u></b></p>	<p><b><u>Anti- establishment</u></b></p>
<p>7.12.2018</p> <p>Departure of the UK, integration must continue, causes major states to leave</p>	<p>20.11.2018</p> <p>The French and British situation have points in common</p>
<p><b><u>Social Media</u></b></p>	
<p>11.12.2018</p> <p>Polarising politics, algorithms, conceived and organised, social media, small local groups, changes in Facebook algorithms, prioritise local content, calming, opposite, exploding, <b>engine of mass radicalisation</b>, new ways of campaigning, protesting,</p>	<p>20.11.2018</p> <p>“Progressives”, “technology of liberation”, spread of anti-system movements</p> <p>11.12.2018</p> <p>Poison for democracy, Golem, blue thumb,</p>

organising, discussing, nobody has any real idea where the path might lead, <b>fiercely resisting</b> , Leave campaigns overspent, Russia, meddled, US election, very plainly did happen// <b>because these things happened, the actual views of actual voters aren't the issue</b> , mad social media radicalisation, distance, Facebook, "determining role", wholly plausible, arrogant belief, polarisation, more rational	thermometre, causing the Yellow fever, Russian bots, belittling the protests, technology, not neutral, forms behaviour, thinking and acting, the “ <b>netoyen</b> ”, internet, the <b>citizen</b> , newspaper, political consequences, printing press, Reformation, catalyst, coordination, heterogeneous sometimes contradictory beliefs, democratic despotism, immediacy, horizontality, radicality, monomania, <b>the algorithm</b> , explosive, decompose politics, reconstruct?
<b><u>Previous Revolutions</u></b>	<b><u>France</u></b>
3.12.2018  The worst rioting in central Paris since 1968, not yield to street protests in the way his predecessors have done since the 1980's	6.12.2018  The history of France is full of revolutions which are replaced by even more radical revolutions, but the speed of these changes is breathtaking, the revolutionary tradition so very French, which regularly puts the French out in the streets to behead the King, collective passion for equality, Revolution is still part of the French equation, the truly damaged country of Europe is France, maybe Italy is not quite so badly in shape, the whole democratic world has or will have the same challenges
5.12.2018  Protests that have forced all his predecessors since the 1970's into retreat, Riots on a scale not seen there (Paris) since the 1960s,	
11.12.2018	
1789, 1968, 2005, Near- mythical status	Haunted by 1789, 1917

<b><u>Identities found only in <i>The Times</i></u></b>
<b><u>The EU</u></b>
Elite Euroclass, the European Ideal, must be defended, delusion, integration, national feeling, grand scheme, EU defence pact, operationally nonsensical, Brussels' madcap ambitions, German common sense, migration crisis, departure of the UK, travails of Italy, populist surge, poorly designed common currency, design flaw in the EU scheme

<b><u>Identities found only in <i>Le Figaro</i></u></b>
<b><u>The US presidential elections 2016 : anti- establishment</u></b>
20.11.2018

Confrontation between “white collar workers”, open to minorities, strangers to inequality, and “blue collar workers”, factories closing, life quality stagnating, lowered life expectancy
<b><u>Italian populist coalition government : anti-establishment</u></b>
20.11.2018  The national mass, Gramsci, those excluded by globalisation expressed themselves against it, the old right/left dichotomy replaced by a new high/ low master/ slave dichotomy, master: more globalisation, more liberalisation, “national- popular” serf: less free markets, less globalisation, less EU, more existential and professional stability
<b><u>The Poujadists : Anti- system</u></b>
16.11.2018  Craftsmen and merchants, revolt against tax officers, fear, changes, economy, degradation, supermarkets, industrialisation, defend, eternal France, Americanisation, province, Paris, small human villages, big anonymous cities, the individual, inquisition of the State, refusing, ‘artificial’ left/right dichotomy, demanding to control elected officials, a general assembly, short- lasting, unexpectedly successful elections, defence of the French Empire, antisemitism
<b><u>Louis XIV: Absolutism</u></b>
23.11.2018  Absolutism had succeeded too well in isolating the Crown from intermediate bodies and civil society, without influence from public affairs, detached, passivity, privileges, state alone in charge of the public interest, a centralised government fears its isolation and its weakness, destroyed individual influences on political associations

## 7. Reflexivity before Analysis

Reflexivity is necessary to create distance to better understand interpretations. Interpretations formed by experience and understanding and cannot be truly objective. Using Laclau and Mouffe’s Discourse Theory, I will interpret methodologically. To keep the analysis well-grounded I will work as closely as possible to the text. As this study contributes to the general discourse being studied, self-examination is necessary to clarify situations that limit the complete understanding of knowledge”<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> Bohman, James, *Pluralism and the Pragmatic turn: The Transformation of Critical Theory* p.94- 95

Having grown up in the UK and Sweden and spent almost a year studying and working in France, I only ever experienced benefits of globalisation. Being aware of my perspective as well as differing perspectives will help me create a nuanced critical analysis. As I studied in Lyon during November and December 2018 (when the *Gilet Jaune* protests started and when the studied articles were published) I did come across the tumult. However, the analysis is based only on the content of the articles, as the newspapers' discourses, not the movements or individuals themselves, are the focus of this study. I speak French fluently (though not natively) which allowed me to properly understand the newspaper articles. While I may have missed certain nuances of the language, I have double-checked the choice of words with native speakers whenever I felt the need to. Having English as my mother tongue, I had no trouble analysing the newspaper articles. I did have preexisting hypotheses concerning prejudice between both countries, which I am aware of when analysing, taking care to question my reasoning.

## 8. Analysis of Results

The analysis examines identities and moments presented in the preceding table. The signifiers linked to these identities reveal chains of equivalence and difference, floating signifiers, antagonisms, hegemonic interventions and dislocation. These affect our understanding of identity and their position in the discourse.

First, signifiers related to the *Gilets Jaunes*' identity in *The Times* respectively *Le Figaro* are analysed. Second, the signifiers that form the identity of Macron's government in both newspapers are discussed. After this, the role that the moment "social media" has related to the newspapers' discourse of the *Gilets Jaunes* is examined. Finally, differences between the overall discourse of *The Times* and *Le Figaro* are investigated. These steps help show how distance to the events affects how the identity of the *Gilets Jaunes* are discursively conveyed.

## 8.1. Gilets Jaunes

### 8.2. The movement “*Les Gilets Jaunes*”

A chain of equivalence describing the *Gilets Jaunes* can be formed using signifiers found in the studied articles. In *Le Figaro*<sup>23</sup>, “the mobilisation” of a “forgotten France” is connected to two main types of signifiers, both related to the location of the protests. The first is directly connected to the urban sprawl of these locations; the “outskirts of the largest cities” where “a large number of commuters live”. Being situated on “main traffic routes” in valleys or along the coasts is considered a determining signifier, as is “car dependency”, which makes the protestors “extra sensitive to the price of petrol”. Indirectly this means that people from large towns are not typical protestors. Political signifiers are the second type; departments which largely voted for Macron in the “first round of the presidential elections” had “a limited number of points of action”, while “a particularly significant mobilisation” is found in “strongholds” of the “Rassemblement National”. The journalist suggests that this confirms the idea that many of the *Gilets Jaunes* support this party, creating an antagonism: supporters of Macron do not support the Yellow Vests.

In *The Times*<sup>24</sup> the primary cause of the revolt is the moment “everything Macron stands for”. Raised petrol taxes and decreased state spending are pointed out as catalysts for the protests. Similarly to in *Le Figaro*, “small towns and the countryside where people depend on cars” signifies “la France périphérique”, where the *Gilets Jaunes* are described as being from. Support for Marine Le Pen, the lowered “wealth tax”, and “stagnation in living standards” are also described as causes in *The Times*<sup>25</sup>.

In *Le Figaro*<sup>26</sup> the *Gilets Jaunes* are described as “a multifaceted and spontaneous grassroots movement of complaints”, emphasising the dynamic, non- hierarchical organisation of the movement. In *The Times*<sup>27</sup>, the conflict is once again presented as a

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<sup>23</sup>, Jérôme Fourquet “Une mobilisation qui a pris une tonalité anti-Macron”, *Le Figaro* 19.11.2018, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>24</sup> Charles Bremner, “King Macron faces his own French Revolution”, *The Times*, 21.11.2018, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>25</sup> Hugo Rifkind, “How Facebook is polarising our politics” *The Times* (London), 11.12.2018, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>26</sup> Laure Mandeville, “Les « gilets jaunes », version française de la révolte « populiste »?”, *Le Figaro* 6.12.2018, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>27</sup> Charles Bremner, “King Macron”

“grassroots movement”. *Le Figaro*<sup>28</sup> writes that the Facebook- group “La France en colère” allows “the coordination of people with heterogenous and sometimes contradictory demands” which are “haphazard” reinforces this polyvalent group identity and their lack of structure. The most common demand for a form of direct democracy, “the Citizens’ Initiative Referendum” is said to prove that the protests are “democratic rather than social or political”. Through this, the movement’s identity is not so much related to *which* reforms need to be made, but *how* they need to be made. However, being described as concerned by their struggles “to make ends meet by the end of the month rather than to avoid the end of the world” indicates that they are primarily interested in short-term solutions to their own problems rather than long-term reforms. While many protestors are described as being “middle-aged” or “pensioners”, *the Times* writes that “schoolchildren” have joined the protests, “blockading schools” on the outskirts of the largest towns “in sympathy with the revolt”<sup>29</sup>. This broadens the identity of the Yellow Vests and indicates that the discontent is spread among many ages.

An antagonism that separates “ ‘moderate’ yellow vests” who want “referendums, a halt to fuel tax rises and a rise in the minimum wage”<sup>30</sup> from “hundreds of ‘professional’ far-right and anarchist looters” is found in *The Times*. A chain of equivalence describes the extremists as all wanting to “use the explosion of popular anger to overthrow “the system”, not just Macron. “The system” is a floating signifier as it has different meanings for each group. They are signified as “violent”, having “built barricades, set fire to cars and buildings and attacked the police”. *The Times* reports a “punch- up” between “ultra-right” and “far-left” Yellow Vests. This demonstrates overdetermined identity indicating that “Gilet Jaune” is a secondary identity and “ultra-right militants”, “far-left groups” and those “detained during the riots” who had “no known political affiliation” are the master signifiers of these groups<sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup> Eugenie Bastié, “Les réseaux sociaux, « poison pour la démocratie » ?.” *Le Figaro*, 11.12.2018, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>29</sup> Charles Bremner, “Macron caves in as yellow vest protesters get taste for blood.” *The Times*, 5.12.2018, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>30</sup> Charles Bremner, “Police were powerless to save Paris from mob.” *The Times*, 3.12.2018, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>31</sup> Adam Sage, “Macron’s scalp will not satisfy violent extremists.” *The Times*, 4.12.2018, LexisNexis Academic.

### 8.3. Chains of Equivalence and Difference between the Yellow Vests and other Movements

In *Le Figaro*<sup>32</sup> populist movements in France, the UK, the US and Italy are compared. The French protests are described as a conflict between «la France périphérique» and «la France des métropoles» with the master signifiers “being from somewhere” and “being from anywhere”. Both Brexit and the Yellow Vests are described as a “wide-spread scale of the people’s revolt against a globalised society”, indirectly meaning that this is what “la France des métropoles” and Remainers are for. Similar formations of group identities are found in Italy, where the discourse of the populist coalition government creates antagonism among people by a “high/low dichotomy” “wanting more free markets, more globalisation and more liberalisation” compared to “less free trade, (...) less globalisation and less EU”. Likewise, the 2016 US election results are considered to be the result of conflict between “white-collar workers” who are “open to minorities” but “strangers to inequalities” and “blue-collar workers” who have seen “life quality stagnating” and “life expectancy diminishing”. The antagonisms presented all bear resemblance to each other, and all discourses are centred around “globalisation”, indicating that this is their nodal point. However, these movements themselves make use of globalisation in order to spread, indicating that they are not against globalisation if their agenda becomes hegemonic.

A chain of equivalence compares the *Gilets Jaunes* to the Poujadist movement in *Le Figaro*<sup>33</sup>. Two signifiers differentiate the movements: “defence of French imperialism and anti-semitism”. The rest are deemed to be shared by the Poujadists and the *Gilets Jaunes*. The article places emphasis on the short life of the Poujadist movement due to their lack of political plan, suggesting a similar future may be true for the *Gilets Jaunes*.

Quoting the parliamentarian Francois Ruffin from the left party “La France Insoumise”, *Le Figaro* calls “the *Gilets Jaunes* the “#MeToo of the working class”<sup>34</sup>. The chain of equivalence states that both identities involve “social media”, “revealing what has been swept under the carpet”, “short-circuiting media and institutions which were disadvantageous to them”, causing “radicality”, “the smothering of moderate voices”, and “invitations to

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<sup>32</sup> Alexandre Devecchio, “Quand les intellectuels voyaient venir les « gilets jaunes ».” *Le Figaro*, 20.11.2018, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>33</sup> Guillaume Perrault, “Qualifier les « gilets jaunes » de «poujadistes » est-ce leur nuire?.” *Le Figaro*, 16.11.2018, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>34</sup> Eugenie Bastié, “Les réseaux sociaux”

lynchings”. There is no chain of difference that differentiates the movements. While Ruffin considered this comparison to be positive, here both are described with negatively used signifiers, such as “liberation makes deliberation impossible”. The discourse creates closure for these elements, changing their meaning, to “acting too much and thinking too little” rather than “becoming free” and “thinking”. This closure reveals the position these social movements are designated in the newspaper’s discourse.

#### 8.4. Macron as President

Macron’s identity is presented both from the point of view of his supporters and of the people protesting against him. By the protestors, he is called “the sock puppet of the elite and the ‘old regime’” indicating that they do not trust him. From the point of view of his supporters or “the western elite”, *Le Figaro* describes him as “the young King, so French, so talented, so well behaved who was going to save Europe and why not!, the West, the international system and the liberal order from the claws of new tyrants”<sup>35</sup>. This chain of difference that uses hyperbolic signifiers to describe Macron as overly ambitious, or, to quote *The Times*<sup>36</sup>, “boundlessly overconfident”, indirectly describes Macron’s supporters as naïve. A social antagonism lies in the people’s trust in Macron’s political capabilities, making it a question of legitimacy. The identity of Macron is designated the position of the cause of the protests often in *The Times*. One exception is the moment “monarchical constitution” which raises “unreasonable expectation for its leaders”<sup>37</sup>, a description meaning that this moment replaces Macron’s position as the cause. Several other articles, however, do consider Macron to be the cause, or at least “very, very annoying”<sup>38</sup>. He is identified as being “the president of the rich” who “cast himself as a monarch,” “provok(ed) contempt” and “acted too late”<sup>39</sup>. A chain of equivalence in *The Times* includes signifiers such as “slayer of populism”, “mighty reformer” and the “darling of liberal (...) media angry at Brexit ” with “perfect English”, “pristine hair”, “third way-style Blairite bravery”, “orgasmic (...) just among the men”<sup>40</sup>. The closure of this discourse clearly gives the signifiers a sarcastic meaning. This suggests that

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<sup>35</sup> Laure Mandeville, “Version française”

<sup>36</sup> Iain Martin, “Macron's emperor complex has tripped him up” *The Times*, 7.12.2018, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>37</sup> Charles Bremner, “King Macron”

<sup>38</sup> Hugo Rifkind, “Facebook”

<sup>39</sup> Charles Bremner, “King Macron” and “Macron caves in”

<sup>40</sup> Iain Martin, “Macron's emperor complex”

being anti-populist, progressive, liberal, French, like Blair or attractive to gay people are floating signifiers given negative connotations in the discourse of *The Times* and can be seen as an example of hegemonic struggle.

### 8.5. Chains of Equivalence and Difference Concerning Macron

The chain of equivalence calling Macron “King”, “monarch” who “has hurt himself with caustic banter that looks like contempt for the people” in *The Times*<sup>41</sup> emphasizes the *Gilets Jaunes* discontent while drawing on historical French discontent for monarchs. This closure gives “King” and by extension “Macron” a negative identity in the discourse. A chain of equivalence in *Le Figaro*<sup>42</sup> compares the current French government to the absolutism of Louis XIV, the shared isolating characteristics demonstrated by the phrase “between the Élysée and the streets, there is nothing”. The “lack of relay” combined with “exposure to social media” is said to make the executive powers seem “anemic” emphasising that too much centralisation is a fatal weakness.

A chain of difference is created between the identities “Macron” and “Thatcher” in *The Times*. Here, the master signifier of Macron is “Thatcher in reverse” meaning he is not a “great reformer” who “built steadily”, “learning as she went”, “listening to the best advice”, “conceding early” and “made sure to win” but “only later (...) shed self-doubt and acquire(d) an imperial complex”<sup>43</sup>. *Le Figaro*<sup>44</sup> also compares Macron’s fuel taxes to Thatcher’s suppression of free milk for school children in a chain of equivalence. Here, both are described as “secondary” and “derisory”. A chain of difference suggests that the “Iron Lady” learned from this “humiliation” and would “never again give in”, while Macron still needs to learn to focus only on what is “crucial” and “identified as such by a majority of our compatriots”. The discourses of both newspapers designate opposite identities to Macron and Thatcher. However, in the British discourse this antagonism is more grounded than in the French one; becoming more like Thatcher could change Macron’s identity. In fact, this

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<sup>41</sup> Charles Bremner, “King Macron”

<sup>42</sup> Guillaume Perrault, “Peut-on encore gouverner notre pays ?” *Le Figaro*, Novembre 23, 2018, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Guillaume Perrault, “Notre Pays”

change and is deemed necessary to overcome “the weakness of the French democratic culture” which has “more fragile roots than those of our neighbours”. The comparison is an example of a hegemonic intervention, as all neighbouring countries to France have roots in undemocratic culture, but the “more fragile roots” in France are accepted without challenge.

## 8.6. The Government

Édouard Philippe, the Prime Minister, is quoted saying that “the French people who have put on yellow vests love their country, they want lower taxes and for their work to pay. That’s also what we want.” These elements are floating signifiers because if the government and the protesters had agreed on their meaning, there would be no conflict. Noticeably, the quote doesn’t include *which* taxes should be lowered for *who*, nor *which* work should pay for *who*, and this is what differs the politicians’ and the protesters’ understandings of these signifiers. Similarly, what it means to “love one’s country” can be interpreted very widely, for instance, nationalist protestors with short-term goals would understand “loving one’s country” differently than environmentalist politicians imposing fuel taxes to avoid future environmental consequences<sup>45</sup>.

## 8.7. Social Media

In *The Times*<sup>46</sup> social media is designated the identity of being a catalyst for the “Gilets Jaunes”, as an altered Facebook -algorithm made users “more likely to see local news”. “A petition calling for cheaper fuel” in the group “la France en Colère” was brought up on “a local radio station” after which the petition “took over social media”, “exploding” into mass-protests. Writing that Facebook “unwittingly created an engine of mass radicalisation”, assumes the company’s unawareness of the consequences.

Social media is equated to “poison for democracy” by Macron and *Le Figaro*. A social antagonism between “netoyens” who let “their day pass using the internet” and “citoyens” who “dedicate their time to read a newspaper” is created. “Netoyen” is a direct translation of English “netizen”, likely chosen instead of regular French “internaute” to rhyme, although the

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<sup>45</sup> Charles Bremner, “Macron caves in”

<sup>46</sup> Hugo Rifkind, “Facebook”

choice to call one group “virtual citizens” designates them a role of not quite “citizens”. The use of signifiers “pass” for “netoyens” and “dedicate” for “citizens” links passivity to “netoyens”. By comparing social media’s effects on politics to the printing press’ role in the Reformation, “citoyens” clearly have a more positive role in the discourse than “netoyens”.

An antagonism between people who consider the moment to be “the golem with a blue thumb that is the threat of our times” and those who see it as “the thermometer that is blamed for causing yellow fever” is created. While the first position designates “Facebook” (“blue thumb” referring to the like button) as a cause, the second accuses Macron of blaming the uprisings on social media<sup>47</sup>.

This antagonism is found in *The Times* as well; the first identity is signified with “fierce resistance” denying the “influence of social media on “the Brexit referendum” and “the last US election” even though it “very plainly did happen”. With “fervour” the second group “insist that” because of social media’s influence, “the actual views of actual voters aren't the issue” but “mad social media radicalisation is the root cause of everything they don't like” designated by *The Times* as in “itself a sort of mass social media radicalisation”. Distance is considered the decisive master signifier for this group identification<sup>48</sup>.

Noticeably, both *Le Figaro* and *The Times* have a sceptical perspective of how social media affects politics. One aspect which may explain this is the dislocation of the dominant discourse of traditional media, faced with the threat of social media and the general public’s access to free online news content. These moments were never properly integrated into the previously hegemonic traditional media but rejected, as articles, regardless of quality, that are available for free online at any time become an economic threat to purchasable physical newspapers. This dislocation has made the identity of newspapers lack completeness. Although attempts have been made to renew the identity of traditional media, the numerous newspapers and editorial offices that have been closed down indicate partial disintegration of this identity, due to the incomplete discursive structure surrounding it. The destructive political identity designated to social media by both newspapers can therefore be seen as an externalisation of their original lacking identity.

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<sup>47</sup> Eugénie Bastié, “Les réseaux sociaux”

<sup>48</sup> Hugo Rifkind, “Facebook”

## 8.8. Global or Local?

The question of whether the protests are a result of global contemporary populism or historical French revolutionary traditions is an example of a hegemonic struggle. *Le Figaro*<sup>49</sup> notes that the idea of “the so very French revolutionary tradition” occurs in most international commentary, seen through signifiers “France taking to the streets”, “behead the King”, “collective passion for equality” and “revolutions which were replaced by other more radical revolutions”. *The Times* designating Macron the role as the “King” being protested against reflects this discourse. Twice, the riots are signified as “the worst since 1968” and French presidents are signified with “retreat(ing)” because of “street protests” since “the 1970’s” and “the 1980’s”<sup>50</sup>. These signifiers identify the current riots as another result of a historical French tradition. The signifiers considered causes in *The Times* (11/12/2018) “the near-mythical status of the riots of 1968, and those of 2005”, and that “these people are French, for god’s sake, this is what they do”<sup>51</sup> have the same impact on the discourse. *Le Figaro* rejects most comments as stereotypes. Quoting the *Washington Post* they point out that “the whole democratic world has or will have the same challenges”<sup>52</sup>. This places the riots in a global contemporary discourse rather than a historically French one. Likewise, several chains of equivalence compare the Yellow Vest protests with movements such as Brexit, Trump’s electoral victory, the current Italian populist coalition government and #MeToo, which support this articulation.

Most articles in *The Times* focus on Macron’s role in the uprisings and internal differences among the protestors. Chains of difference separate the French uprisings from populist movements in Britain. This indicates that the movement is more often placed in a French political discourse. This externalisation can be considered the result of dislocation. Previously prevailing political discourses such as those based on belonging to political parties cannot be used to understand the Yellow Vests, who consider themselves apolitical (apart from extremists), nor, for that matter, Macron with his “start-up party”. This causes political identities formed in the previously hegemonic discourse to feel lack in identity. Externalising

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<sup>49</sup> Laure Mandeville, “Version française”

<sup>50</sup> Charles Bremner, “King Macron”, “Police”, “Macron caves in”

<sup>51</sup> Hugo Rifkind, “Facebook”

<sup>52</sup> Laure Mandeville, “Version française”

the protests as part of a global contemporary populist discourse creates an illusionary full identity and eliminates the threat to the hegemonic discourse.

Likewise, in the UK, previous hegemonic political discourse has been dislocated by the aftermath of the *Brexit* referendums. The stalemate that implementing article 50 has resulted in threatens previously prevalent hegemony in Britain; Island mentality, an antagonism between the UK and the Continent and the understanding that the country can solve its problems alone. The externalisation of this threat can be seen in the phrase “we certainly have our problems in Britain, but at least our politicians are wrestling openly with the fundamentals of our constitution (...) in parliament, inside an ancient an imperfect institution. In Macron’s France it is being settled in the streets once again.<sup>53</sup>”

## 8.9. Comparison to Previous Research

To conclude the analysis, the statistics from Bedock et al.s’ quantitative research is compared to the discursive findings. This study found that the Yellow Vests primarily see themselves as employees belonging to the working class or the ‘lower’ middle class but not “the most economically vulnerable households”. In the discourse of the newspapers, their identity is signified with “several central socio-professional categories” but also being “working class”. The average age in the quantitative study is 45. In the article, protestors are identified as being “pensioners”, “middle-aged” and “school pupils” and although discursive analysis can not tell us whether the average of these people’s age is 45, it complements the statistics with a more nuanced understanding of the identity that these age categories signify. Bedock et al.’s study found that while 81% of protestors were distanced from political parties, most considered themselves to be left, apolitical or far left. In the articles, only extremists were signified as being “left” or “right” and for them, these signifiers are more important to their identity than being a “*Gilet Jaune*”. For the rest, the discourse presents the signifier “la France périphérique” and being “anti-Macron” as more important to identity than the left-right political spectrum.

The reasons the study found people were protesting include being against “tax and benefits system considered unfair” rather than just the specific petrol tax. Goals of the movement include cutting taxes, increasing citizens power, increasing the minimum wage,

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<sup>53</sup> Iain Martin, “Macron's emperor complex”

purchasing power and pensions, redistributing wealth, listening to the citizens and to introduce complete institutional change. Other reasons to protest were to acquire power, to demonstrate their economic struggles to politicians, to protest excessive tax burdens, to protest Macron's government and call for his resignation<sup>54</sup>. Redistribution of wealth, lowered taxes, raised minimum wages, Citizen's Initiative Referendums, Macron's resignation and "overthrowing the system" are all mentioned as goals of the protestors, meaning that the discourse of the *Times* and *Le Figaro* reflects that of the statistics.

## 9. Conclusion

The discourse of 12 newspaper articles from *The Times* and *Le Figaro* that analyse the beginning of the *Gilet Jaune* uprisings in France last autumn have been studied using theory and methodological concepts based on the work of Laclau and Mouffe. Identities, moments, signifiers and master signifiers detected in *Le Figaro* and *The Times* have been presented in a table, after which they were analysed to reveal social antagonisms, hegemonic interventions, floating signifiers, chains of equivalence or chains of difference and dislocation. These reveal the difference between the discourses of *Le Figaro* and *The Times*, dependent on location. Finally, the results of this study have been compared to Bedock et al.'s study, to introduce to the discourse the *Gilets Jaunes*' self-perception, as presented by the researchers. By doing this, the way discursive choices in these newspapers affect understanding of main identities is made clear. The main identities were found to be *The Gilets Jaunes* and *Macron* in both newspapers. Additionally, the moment *social media* is of importance, as one article in both newspapers discusses the role this had had as a catalyst for the protests.

Main signifiers linked to the *Gilets Jaunes* include being from *La France Périphérique*, being dependent on cars, being apolitical but against Macron, being anti-establishment, wanting a redistribution of wealth and being concerned about "democratic" questions rather than social or political ones. *The Times* and *Le Figaro* differ mainly through which discourses they understand the identity through; *The Times* considers internal details and differences more than external comparisons. By the number of signifiers designating Macron the role as

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<sup>54</sup> Bedock, Gremion, de Raymond et al., "Gilets jaunes » : une enquête pionnière"

Bedock, Gremion, de Raymond et al., translated by David Fernbach. "*Gilets jaunes: a pioneering study*"

the cause of the protests, many more than found in *Le Figaro*, it is clear that the conflict is understood through a French political discourse in *The Times*. *Le Figaro*, meanwhile, relates the movement to several other contemporary movements in other places. While they do emphasize signifiers that detail the movement in itself, such as “la France périphérique”, this is placed in a chain of equivalence with other populist movements. This indicates that *Le Figaro* mainly uses a contemporary global discourse to understand the *Gilet Jaune* movement. These differences move the cause away from the country of publication, externalising them, which can be seen as a result of dislocation of previously prevailing hegemonic discourses.

A similarity between the newspapers’ discourse is the designation of the role of social media as a catalyst for the conflicts. In general, they are designated a destructive political role, compared to that of the “printing press” and “religious structures”. This choice can be explained by dislocation of the hegemonic discourse of the traditional media, caused by social media. Identifying social media as a catalyst above anything else for political tumult can be a way of externalising this threat, in an attempt to recreate a full identity in a lacking structure.

As the theory used has roots in constructivism, there is a risk that the results become too constructivist and abstract to apply to “reality” (which according to this theory is also constructed perceptions). The term “dislocation” dissuades this effect as it studies the reasons that the discourse is produced<sup>55</sup>, and in comparing the results to statistics, which may be unconventional for discourse theory, the findings here are related to findings that are generally considered to be positivist.

This study is relevant since many areas are facing the challenge of populist movements, polarisation and radicalisation. Social media has opened up possibilities for anyone to write anything, which would seem to be the core of democracy, but has also led to increased hate and totalitarian tendencies. Social media platforms therefore share the problem of traditional media; the political choice of what should be published and distributed and which kinds of discursive and real-world effects these choices could have. A study of social media and the type of discourse found there could help increase understanding of these aspects. This study could be repeated and broadened to include newspapers, or other forms of media, with

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<sup>55</sup> Bergström and Boréus, p. 401

different political stances, or published in other countries than France and the UK. This would broaden the scope of the study and add nuance to the discussion. It could also be applied to discourse of different movements, to study any change in discourse compared to my research. The results are not very generalisable as they are qualitative, however, they could help to form hypotheses for future research.

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### 10.1. Empirical Material

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