

The protest repertoire of white overalls

combining contradictions in social and climate justice struggles

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Abstract

This thesis examines the white overall as a protest repertoire within European social and climate justice groups between 2000 and 2025. Focusing on the protest models of Tute Bianche and Ende Gelände, the study discusses the practical and communicative functions of the white overall, as well as how the repertoire has been developed, transformed and diffused across different political and spatiotemporal contexts. Drawing on five semi-structured interviews with activists who have participated in white overall protest actions, the analysis applies theories on social movements and protest repertoires as contentious politics. The findings show that the white overall functions both as a practical tool – providing anonymity, protection and collective identity – and as a communicative symbol of nonviolence, determination and legitimacy through combining and highlighting perceived contrasts. The study further reveals tensions between militancy and conformity, innovation and stagnation as well as the challenges of increased repression. By tracing the historical trajectory of the white overall, this thesis contributes to a deeper understanding of how protest repertoires emerge, develop and stagnate over time.

Key words: Social movements; protest repertoires; white overalls; militancy; nonviolence

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1. Introduction

Several contemporary social and climate justice groups across the globe are acknowledging the vastness of the escalating planetary catastrophe of our time for what it is: a worldspanning crisis of crises – social, ecological and economic shocks colliding, interlinking and amplifying each other at an accelerating rate (della Porta & Parks 2014, pp. 19–24; Delannoy et al. 2025, pp. 1–3). Moore argues that the core driving force of this *polycrisis* is the Western fossil-fueled capitalist world system that has globalized extractivist and appropriating processes and structures, further fueling economical inequalities and ecological degradation (2022, pp. 123–130).

Resisting this socio-ecologically intertwined world apocalypse, social movements have tied bonds of unity between human rights, equality, anti-racist, anti-capitalist and climate justice groups in a radical intersectional struggle across time and space (della Porta & Parks 2014:19–24; Dwivedi 2001:27–28). Since the global justice movement (GJM), also known as the alter globalisation movement, of the 2000s to the contemporary climate justice movement (CJM) and its affiliates, the embodiment of this struggle has taken a broad variety of shapes in different forms of protest actions. To understand the characteristics of this struggle in practice, one might look to the actual actions they perform for the cause (della Porta & Diani 2020, pp. 182–188). Widely acknowledged as a practical and communicative tool prevalent in disruptive actions of European radical social and climate justice groups is the *white overall*. From the counter summit protests at the turn of the millennium to the blockades and occupations of industrial infrastructure of the last 10 years, activists in white hazmat suits have displayed determination, legitimacy and urgency of the cause through effective, nonviolent, civil disobedient and militant mass action tactics. This study will focus on the specific use of the white overall in protest actions.

Looking at the strategies and traditions, similarities and differences between several social and climate justice groups within this united struggle gain insights into the advantages and challenges of the white overall repertoire, spanning across several social movements and cycles between the 1990s to 2025. By analysing the stories and experiences of five activists that have partaken in protest actions using white overalls in Europe between 2000–2025, conducted in five semi-structured interviews, it is possible to track the development and

transformations of the white overall repertoire from anti-GMO and anti-neoliberal protests in the 1990s, to the white bloc demonstrations during world summits of the 2000s, to anti-coal mass actions from 2015, and finally to the Palestine solidarity blockade of Mærsk's headquarters in 2025.

1.1 Relevance for the subject of human ecology

The subject of human ecology examines the distinctions, relationships, interactions and interconnections between humans, societies and their ecological surroundings, through an holistic approach combining disciplines of the social and natural sciences (Steiner 2016, pp. 1–4). Further, the analysis of the climate justice movement understands the interconnectedness of social and ecological processes, structures and systems from a movement's perspective, understanding social and ecological industrial advocating for a radical abolition of the capitalist system, for the sake of the environment as well as humans (della Porta & Parks 2014:19–24). Both the GJM and the CJM, particularly in focus in this study, have played crucial roles in shaping the characteristics, strategies, traditions and protest repertoires of this struggle.

Applied to social movements and political activism, the interdisciplinary approach of human ecology of interconnectedness between the social and the ecological spheres highlights how political issues are connected. By identifying similarities and connections of social and climate justice struggles (common goals, challenges, opponents, strategies, traditions and so on) unifying bonds may be strengthened between them. Thus, to examine these aspects of the GJM and the subsequent CJM is of relevance for the subject of human ecology. Moreover, it provides insights into how the subject might be understood from a movements approach. More specifically, examining the continuity of using white overalls in protest actions provides some insights into how struggles for social and climate justice are connected through protest repertoires, as it embodies a widely recognized tradition of several social and climate justice groups from the 1990s to the present day.

1.2 Purpose

The purpose of this study is to examine how protest strategies of European social and climate justice groups including white overalls as a practical and communicative tool constitute a protest repertoire that displays *WUNC* (worthiness, unity, numbers and commitment), as theorized by della Porta and Diani and Tilly et al. (2020, pp. 6–10; 2020, pp. 182–188), that has been developed, transformed and diffused across social movements between the 1990s and 2025. The protest models of the Italian subgroup to the Ya Basta! network Tute Bianche and the German climate justice alliance Ende Gelände are understood as the main contributors to the characteristics of the repertoire and will thus be in particular focus.

1.2.1 Problem statement

In-depth research has been conducted on protest forms of Tute Bianche and Ende Gelände, the memory work of continuing traditions across social movements, as well as the widespread norm of nonviolence in contemporary social and climate justice movements (as discussed in the chapter 2. and 3). Relating to the insights of these studies as an elaborate background for this study, I understand the specific focus on the repertoire of white overalls in direct actions by social and climate justice groups in Europe as an unexplored aspect of the area. Furthermore, to understand how a contemporary protest repertoire has come to be, one must look to its predecessors, developers, transformers and continuators throughout history.

1.2.2 Research questions

- What are the practical and communicative functions of the white overall in Tute Bianche and Ende Gelände's protest models?
- How has the white overall repertoire been developed, transformed and diffused across European social and climate justice groups between 2000 and 2025?

2. Background

The following chapter will provide a context in which this study will be placed in the form of some examples of research touching on the topics of the white overall and the disruptive protest forms' strategies, cultures, traditions, repertoires and histories of both the TB and EG and broader GJM and the subsequent CJM in Europe. Further, the focus of this study will be discussed in relation to these, in order to establish a position in the combined research where this study may contribute additional insights.

Acknowledging the in-depth research that will be briefly displayed in the following chapters, I hope to further contribute to the discussion of some protest repertoires involving civil disobedience, nonviolence and direct action, widespread approaches among contemporary social and climate justice groups in the western world. Moreover, I aim to provide some additional insights in the strategic considerations motivating its adoption, as well as movement traditions, into European radical groups within and adjacent to the alter-globalisation movement and the climate justice movement, with specific focus on the functional role of white overalls in protest actions. Thus, this study will examine the protest repertoires of white overalls as an interconnecting element of social and climate justice struggles in Europe between the 1990s and 2025.

Studying the repertoires of white overalls is a small contribution to the extensive academic work on radical social and climate justice movements. However the specific focus may provide a new perspective of an interconnecting tradition of a disruptive protest tactic prevalent in the context of European radical social and climate justice groups. Furthermore, the human ecologist discipline focus on how social and ecological spheres, structures and systems interlink and interact may provide perspectives on how their accelerating amplified destruction at the hands of extractivist industries, neoliberal markets, genocidal states and complicit companies therefore interrelate and through, but not limited to, identifying shared adversaries illuminate the intersections of the struggles for their longevity.

2.1 Key actors

The main political actors in focus of this study, Tute Bianche and Ende Gelände, understood as the main contributors to the characteristics of the white overall repertoire, has in different documents been referred to as tactics, groups, networks, alliances and movements. This study will refer to them as groups within the GJM respectively the CJM.

- Tute Bianche (White Overalls): a subgroup to or project in association with the Italian Ya Basta! network, first seen in 1997 primarily centered around the occupied social centres movement in central-northern Italy (Montagna 2010, pp. 639–640).
- Ende Gelände (briefly translated to *here but no further*): a German climate justice coalition comprising of activists from anti-nuclear and -coal movement that practice nonviolent civil disobedience to target points along the fossil fuel industry in Europe (Vandepitte et al., 2019 pp. 328–331).

2.2 Colorful contradictions

The western worldview builds on dualisms dating back to ancient Greece, dividing the world in hierarchical dichotomies – culture and nature, civilization and primitivism, reason and emotion, male and female, subject and object, right and wrong (Buckingham 2020, pp. 18–23). This black and white dualism has made possible unjust and unequal, oppressive and exploitative structures – of humans, society and nature – still prevalent in the modern globalized capitalist system (Moore 2022, pp. 125–130). As will be further elaborated in the discussion (see chapter 6.) the white overall can be understood as a symbol of contrasts that further utilizes this dualist logic.

In the case of TB, Nicola Montagna examines the Italian group and its successor *Disobbedienti* (the disobedients) across three protest cycles on different scales between the second half of the 1990s and the 2000s (2010). The research draws on 45 in-depth interviews with activists between 2001–2007 combined with ethnographic observations of demonstrations, meetings and social events as well as analysis of documentary sources. Social

and political context and cleavages, movement resources, interactions with opponents and internationalisation are identified as drivers of the emergence and transformation of the groups and their protest tactics.

Connecting to the spectacular uprising of the Zapatistas in Mexico in 1994 and onward, symbolism from the ‘invisible’ rural indigenous population inspired the rhetoric of the Tute Bianche (ibid. 2010, pp. 643–648). Partly focused on the *protest repertoires* (see chapter 3.) of the groups, Montagna explains the reasoning for their use of white overalls as practical and rhetorical tools in disruptive political actions in Europe. As the name indicates, the TB strategy involved wearing white suits in their protest actions. This served both practical and symbolic purposes. The white suits clad activists called themselves the invisible, white phantoms of the cities. Together with the DIY padding constructed with rubber foam and cardboard to protect from police batons, the white uniform and colorful soft armor was both practical equipment and a communicative tool. Simultaneously, the white color symbolized invisibility as well as the sum of all colors, representing the plurality of the neglected population of an unjust world.

In the early days, Tute Bianche primarily focused on local and national issues (ibid., pp. 642–644). These were centered around issues of the occupied social centers, temporary detention centres for undocumented migrants and social rights for people excluded from welfare benefits. On a grander scale, the GJMt, in which the TB were a part, criticised neo-liberal globalization as a force unifying the world under capitalist rule, transforming but not dissolving poverty and class differences. The Zapatista movement emphasized the interconnectedness of the oppression that globalization placed onto the indigenous population in rural Mexico as well as the urban working class in the global north and would inspire the GJM in their own analysis. Their conclusion was that to combat this force the left needed to recognize its own place in the globalized world and seize the opportunities of intersectional struggles for justice across all borders. This led Tute Bianche to expand the scale of their protests, transnationalising their campaigns to address the EU, transnational neoliberal institutions and state coalitions.

From locally based issues to struggles on a transnational level, TB connected with and involved other elements from adjacent radical social and environmental movements,

organizing protest actions concerning war, decreased labour rights, biotechnology, genetically modified foods and environmental degradation spurred on by neo-liberal and transnational institutions and coalitions. Protests targeted their fairs, conferences and summits, attempting to disrupt the meetings through symbolic and confrontational means. Montagna further discuss the form of protests organized by Tute Bianche, for example how the element of civil disobedience was democratically chosen as a tactic in the summit protests against the G8 in Genoa 2001. The protest form of the Tute Bianche will further be discussed in chapter 5. Results.

Montagna provides a complimentary perspective of the abandonment of summits as mobilizing spaces for protests of the alter-globalization movement, and Tute Bianche therein. The brutal police repression in Genoa led to a change in strategy, marking a return to local and domestic campaigns, the dissolution of Tute Bianche and a breaking with the white overall protest form. Montagna's elaborate insights in the history of TB does not further expand on the diffusion of the model after around 2004.

2.3 Justifying direct action

Several studies have been done on EG, examining their use and justification of civil disobedience and nonviolence as briefly discussed in the previous chapter. The case study conducted by Vandepitte, Vandermoere and Hustinx assess the strategies and methods for protest action implemented by EG, with specific focus on their actions in the spring of 2016, through an ethnographic *civic action* approach (2019, pp. 327–331). Vandepitte, Vandermoere and Hustinx discuss how civil society organisations, political groups such as EG, may struggle for perceived and interpreted legitimacy and appropriateness through going against and attempting to alter, or conforming to dominant expectations within society, such as laws, norms and public opinion. Further, they focus on the cultural patterns as ways of interactions in this struggle. Considerations to this play a part in determining the forms of protest actions implemented by political groups.

In 2016, 3500 German and international activists would for three days occupy an open-pit brown coal mine in the Lausitz region in Germany, effectively shutting down its work for the time being (ibid., pp. 328–331). The widespread international participation and attention to

EG's spectacular direct actions targeting extractivist fossil fuel infrastructure would inspire subsequent climate justice protests and groups to adopt similar strategies in disruptive protest actions across the continent, if not the globe. EG's disruptive mass actions, mainly blockades and occupations, used several organizational tools to communicate the legitimacy of the group, their actions and their cause. Media teams would announce specific actions upon their initiations, deeming them legitimate, although illegal. Further, EG uses organizational tools such as *action consensus* and *affinity group structures* to communicate their legitimacy, both internally and externally. The action consensus is an internal agreement serving as a guideline of a specific action to provide a common ground for the participants. Affinity groups are decentralised networks of individuals forming egalitarian groups based on affinity for decision making, care and collective security. These structures also determined the collectively desired levels of risk (mainly considering police repression) and tasks during the action. Within these groups are duos of *buddy pairs*, serving as the smallest cells for individual decision making. Affinity groups joined together in *fingers*, walking together and dispersing to reach the target.

Engaging in highly organized, uniformly dressed, direct actions while openly communicating their non-violent, non-escalatory action consensus both to the police and the media, Vandepitte et al. identify the political culture of EG as *civil anarchizing*. This term describes how EGs participants negotiate legitimacy, meaning that the activists part take in the radical collective actions with 'broader anarchist principles' – as (good) citizens (2019, pp. 333–339). This combination embraces *unity-in-diversity*, allowing for both 'civil' and 'uncivil' scenes in protest action (ibid. 339). This method constitutes both a means for communicating legitimacy to the public, as well as a result of negotiations of what is perceived as legitimate by the participants. "While civil elements served to appear legitimate toward a general imagined audience embracing mainstream civil norms, the uncivil elements served the purpose of politicizing through the disruption of business as usual." (ibid. p. 337).

Vandepitte, et al. describe in detail the culture of EG's structures and communication as internal and external tools for asserting legitimacy. However, the study does not further expand on other elements of the group's strategy, such as the use of White Overalls. Their term *civil anarchizing* describing the combination of communicational tools to display legitimacy and righteousness with radical and disruptive forms of protest actions will be

evident in the *white overall tactics* described in the results as well as discussion (see chapter 5. and 6).

3. Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework of this study uses a historical understanding of social movements and repertoires theorized by Charles Tilly, Ernesto Castañeda and Lesley J. Wood, as well as Donatella della Porta and Mario Diani's cultural and strategic understanding of protests, which conceptualise *protest repertoires* as strategically deployed yet historically, socially and relational contextual sets of collective action (2020, pp. 6–10; 2020, pp. 182–188). In the discussion (see chapter 6.), their theories of protest repertoires and *display of WUNC* (worthiness, unity, numbers and commitment) will be applied to examine the empirical data shown in the chapter Results (see chapter 5.) centered around development, transformation and diffusion of white overall repertoires, as well as the practical and communicative functions of the white overall from several protest actions and campaigns between 2000 and 2025.

3.1 The structure of social movements

Tilly et al., describes social movements as a distinctive form of contentious politics. To understand, what they are, what they do and what distinguishes them from other political actors, one must look to their history (2020, pp. 3–10). Since the 1700s, the design of contemporary social movements in the western world has remained comparatively the same, featuring some crucial aspects that differentiate them from other forms of politics. Tilly et al. further identify an order of three consequential elements that social movements are comprised of:

1. *social movement campaign*: a sustained, organized public effort making collective claims on target authorities;
2. *social movement repertoire*: combinations from among the following forms of political action: creation of special-purpose associations and coalitions, public meetings, solemn processions, vigils, rallies, demonstrations, petition drives, statements to and in public media, and pamphleteering; and

3. *WUNC displays*: participants' concerted public representations of *WUNC*: worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment on the part of themselves and/or their constituencies. (Tilly et al. 2020, p. 6)

Campaigns are several, often repeated, actions and events that involve three or more parties. These interact and form the social movement in question. Political groups (for example a anti-neoliberal network, Palestine solidarity organization or climate justice alliance), may try to influence power holders (the International Monetary Fund, police authority or a fossil fuel company) actions or inactions in front of and in relation to a some general audience. The form of these recurring actions and performances forms the repertoires of a social movement. Different displays of *WUNC* are motivated based on what is perceived to draw the attention and/or be recognized by the concerned public. A street filling demonstration, uniformly dressed and chanting slogans while resisting police brutality is signaling to the onlooker that the group is committed, united, of significant mass and worthy in its cause (ibid., p. 7). The chosen tactics of a movement to reach political goals and objectives might be changed in relation to what is deemed strategic of the cause and can imply an alteration of their campaigns, repertoires or displays of *WUNC*. Social movements might also interact with other political actors such as parties, unions or non governmental organizations. However compared to these, social movements commonly possess less amounts of material resources, prestige or connections to influence their counterparts and therefore primarily adopt other means to obtain their goals.

3.2 Protest repertoires

As varied as social movements struggles are, so too are the forms of protest they lead to convey their messages to the world (della Porta & Diani 2020, pp. 182–188). Political groups organizing varied forms of protest actions, from ravaging riots to silent sit-ins, might be understood through the same logic: as the articulated goals and opted strategies to maximize the actions impactfulness, successfulness at the negotiation table and support for the cause through public exposure in the particular context in which it takes place. Della Porta and Diani discuss how protest repertoires (developed routines of practices, recurring campaigns, and meeting points for protest actions) not only are shaped by active choices but depend to a large extent on the material and cultural resources and methods available to the particular

group. They evolve slowly and become traditions handed down through generations of activists, its practices and symbols containing meanings and emotions, memories from the past, concerns of the present and hopes for the future. Shaped by lived experiences that influence what is considered possible and viable in the sociopolitical context, they in turn determine what is known to have been done and more or less effective by subsequent generations of social movements. Implementing recognizable protest tactics signals proximity to previous movements as well as legitimacy with similarities to historical struggles that now might generally be considered as just. Moreover, reusing symbols and tactics connects movements and struggles through history to the present day. Therefore, protest repertoires simultaneously enable and constrain collective actions. Some might be used in a variety of settings and struggles, others are less adaptable to changes in time and place.

An example of this is the widespread repertoire of nonviolence across contemporary social and climate justice movements, as discussed by Gallo-Cruz (2024, pp. 2–5). Tracing its diffusion through history, Gallo-Cruz argues that the contemporary activist memory of the of several previous movements has attributed their victories to their perceived commitment to nonviolence. Considered to be the most ideal democratic method for social movements, nonviolence thus has become a global repertoire.

Generally repertoires are developed and transformed, implemented and abandoned over a constantly changing sociopolitical context (della Porta & Diani 2020, pp. 182–188). Repertoires proven strategically successful of previous groups are likely to be used again in subsequent campaigns. Different generations of activists might adjust or transform tried and tested tactics and favour some over others when interacting with other actors on the political arena. Experimentations and innovations of new repertoires usually happen gradually in close vicinity to well known tactics. Further, repertoires emerge and are transformed through physical and symbolic interactions between political actors. Political violence, repression from the police for example, generally results in an increasingly escalating circle of actions and responses between the social movement and their opponents. Furthermore, favourable movement tactics should attract and engage passive onlookers or supporters into becoming active participants while creating an internal sense of collective belonging, and identity to ensure a growing and long lasting movement, until their articulated goals are met. A long lasting movement is not merely defined by its numbers of political victories but also to the

extent in which it constitutes a community for its members. Protest actions should therefore develop solidarities between its participants as well as other groups and movements in addition to impacting or appealing to powerholders.

However, interdynamic aspects of protest strategies are rarely unproblematically compatible with each other and sometimes contradictory (ibid. 2020, p. 185–188). A dilemma for groups attempting to achieve radical change in society (to shut down a summit, occupy a coal mine, or dismantle the entire capitalist system) is finding a balance between impactfulness and legitimacy – strategies that effectively disrupt the status quo in a way that maintains or increases the recognition of the worthiness and urgency of the cause. Disruptive protest actions might be highly impactful, influencing the counterparts decision making (riots or sabotage) while forming an internal sense of collective identity, but without support from the general public gained through successful communication and adequate displays of *WUNC* (see previous chapter) unhindered repression (police violence, incarceration, sanctioning or killing) against said group and dismissal of their cause can be justified on the grounds of political counterparts generally accepted narratives that discredit them as too extreme, or simply go on unnoticed.

Impactful tactics without successful communication, then, risks being counterproductive by alienating the public or even previous sympathisers and allies and becoming a closed in, repressed, diminishing group stuck in ineffective repertoires (ibid. 2020, p. 182–188). The media often plays a crucial part in conveying campaigns, messages and actions of political groups. Depictions of a political group in mainstream media affects the way the general public view them, which might lead to broad support or condemnation of them. Successful movements therefore tend to engage in “colorful protests” to gain media attention, using spectacular symbolism and other forms of eye catching communication to develop controversies fitting to the media's logic. Not too tame, not too extreme protest forms to generate the most publicity while obtaining additional goals of the particular action without alienating the public.

However strategies overly focused on media and public opinion might still disadvantage the cause in limiting one's potential for reaching set goals (ibid. 2020, p. 185–187). In a media logic focused on short lived news flashes of immediate, spectacular, outrageous and grand

one-time events, repeating the same protest tactics again and again while relying on news coverage runs the risk of being distortedly portrayed as more scandal than legitimate struggle conveying a political message, or becoming ‘old news’ and falling into oblivion.

In conclusion, social movements may therefore attempt to develop strategies that lastingly organize as large a mass of participants as possible to partake in impactful actions that are controversial and novel enough to gain the attention of the media while convincing concerned power holders of the urgency and rightfulness of their cause and gaining and maintaining support from the public in order to achieve their goals, while being open to changes in the future (della Porta 2020, p. 183).

4. Methodology

Given the focus on examining *how* the white overall has been used by a variety of political groups and *what* functions it has served, I deemed it appropriate to conduct this study with a qualitative design (Cresswell & Cresswell 2023, pp. 225–228). To answer the research questions (see chapter 1.2.2), information in the form of narratives and stories, experiences and reflections has been gathered through five semi-structured interviews with activists who have partaken and/or organized actions where white overalls have been a part of the chosen tactic, in alignment of the descriptive focus to “make sense of the myriad other elements involved, such as human, political, social, cultural and contextual.” (Walliman 2021, p. 8). The limited number of participants is consistent with qualitative approaches, which prioritise depth, contextualisation, and analytical richness over breadth or generalisability (Knott et al. 2022, pp. 1–4). Rather than measuring frequencies or outcomes of protest, the research seeks to understand how these activists perceive, adopt, and justify specific protest repertoires within broader social, cultural and political contexts. This aligns with common focuses of social movement research, which emphasize actors’ subjective understandings and the relational nature of collective action (della Porta & Diani 2020, pp. 15–20).

During the process of gathering and comparing the recounts of these informants, broader patterns have been identified, and laid the foundations of drawn conclusions. This inductive reasoning has been the primary approach of the data analysed in this study (Walliman 2021,

pp. 21–22). Furthermore the patterns have been compared to the theories formulated by Tilly, Castañeda and Wood as well as della Porta and Diani to further discuss how they might be understood on a theoretical level.

I claim that the de facto reality of the sociopolitical phenomena, *the white overall* and its different repertoires, cannot be understood through mere observation of a series of events, such as protest actions where they have occurred, but has to be approached through inductive interpretations open for critical revisions, in alignment with Walliman's reasoning (2021, p. 26–30). By gathering information in the form of recounts, stories and experiences from five activists who have partaken in one or several protest actions where wearing white overalls has been a key feature, underlying and subjective reasons and issues have been examined. Thus an attempt to understand the reality, the processes and changes described in the results (see chapter 5.), have been made. In alignment with this critical realist paradigm, the conclusions of this study should thus not be considered an objective description of reality, but rather an attempt to explain subjective reasonings done by activists and political groups and open for revisions as the protest repertoire of the white overall continues.

This design makes possible engagement with activists' accounts of protest actions and tactics, and further attempts to critically discuss and explain why repertoires are developed, transformed, imported or abandoned by groups within social movements. Such an approach resonates with della Porta and Diani's emphasis on strategic and symbolic dimensions of action tactics and argument that repertoires are simultaneously enabled and constrained by 'what people know how to do when they want to protest' (2020, p. 185).

4.1 Delimitation

The working process of this study has to a large extent slowly been developing from abstract thoughts and ideas, perceived patterns and a desire to attempt to understand elements of social movements from a human ecologist perspective. The data collection, analysis and comparisons with previous theoretical tools (see chapter 3.) have therefore guided the development of this study. Thus the delimitation has been made partly through the participants. Furthermore, the time limit would also come to play a part in shaping this study,

as more material could not be gathered in time to be analysed. Finally, the interviews have been done primarily with activists organized in Sweden, but due to the internationalist culture of the social movements they engage in, it is difficult (if not impossible) to explain any developments of protest repertoires in one country without understanding how key ideas, traditions, from all over the world, have come to shape them. The same might be said about the temporal delimitation, the sociopolitical phenomena of action protests at one point in time cannot be understood without examining the shape of similar protests in the months, years or decades before.

To examine the emergence and early history of white overalls in protest action has proven to be difficult. Different sources claim different things, and memories of white overall-actions differ. Thus, this study does not claim to give an objective and all encompassing explanation to the origin, different uses and transformation of all tactics including white overalls, instead it uses stories from activists to highlight how it has been used in particular cases in Europe between 2000 and 2025. Furthermore, this study does not attempt to define and describe the social movements that have used white overalls, nor examine the broader context of the protest actions in which white overalls have been part, but specifically *how* white overalls have been used in them. Within this timeframe, a few protest actions are particularly discussed, based on the data collected by the five informants.

4.2 Data collection

The data collected for this study has been made through semi-structured interviews, guided by a flexible topic guide rather than a rigid questionnaire, a suitable method balancing comparability across interviews with openness to the participants' own knowledge, stories and interpretations (Knott et al. 2022, pp. 1–4). This flexibility is essential for exploring how these activists understand the use of white overalls in specific repertoires within different social movements. In line with della Porta and Diani's argument that repertoires express collective identity, memory, and symbolic references to past struggles (2020, pp. 182–188), interviews allow participants to articulate their relations, emotions and experiences attached to particular forms of protest. All interviews were recorded with informed consent and precisely transcribed thereafter.

To my understanding this subject area is largely understudied in academia – an intrinsic motivation for conducting this research through semi structured interviews (Knott et al, 2022, p. 2). Through these I hope to gain deepened insights into groups' understandings and motivations for choosing particular strategies and repertoires – knowledge which rarely see the light of day outside the particular movements. This is the extrinsic motivation for choosing the particular focus group. A purposive sampling was done to select interview participants that would give rich, in-depth information and insight to the, at the time abstract and vaguely formulated, research topic of *the white overall in protest action*. Interviewees were contacted by me based on these reflections on who would give purposeful insights on the topic. However, more people were contacted than would end up participating in the research, primarily through email, which would lead to several dead ends. Interestingly enough, the ones who were able to participate were primarily people who I myself personally and as an activist have met before and mostly in Sweden. The chosen participants were delimited to active participants of protest actions organized by the Italian Ya Basta! network's subgroups Tute Bianche and Ya Basta! Helsinki; the house occupation movement in Lund; Ende Gelände; Take Concrete Action; and the Cut Ties with Genocide camp — groups who in succession have used white overalls as core features in protest action.

It should be reiterated that these aspects should be taken into consideration when revising the results of this study, along with the other critical realist reflections formulated previously (see chapter 4. methodology).

4.3 Data analysis

The data provided by the five informants were primarily analysed in a thematic analysis. Throughout the data collection, during the interviews and their transcription, themes from the interviewees stories and experiences were identified. This became a part of creating the analytical framework for coding the data. The participants' information on their political groups' histories, strategies, repertoires and actions were coded into themes to understand their similarities and differences in an analytical way (Cresswell & Cresswell 2023, p. 228). These related to repertoires involving white overalls' tactics, innovations, transformations, disadvantages, symbolism, collective identities and relations to other actors in social movements.

Analysis in interviews were done in three steps where coding of transcriptions provided an overall thematic map of the interviews' contents. The information connected to the identified themes were then later arranged in clusters to create a broader picture of different informants' opinions on common topics, such as the symbolism of the white overall or the police responses to different white overall tactics. Finally these combined texts were analyzed in comparison to the study's theoretical framework. This created a theoretical understanding of repertoires of hazmat suits in protest action based on activists personal experiences, opinions and stories.

4.4 Ethical considerations

Prior to the data collection being initiated, a purpose statement and contract of consent was written and given to the participants before the interview began. The contract ensured anonymity, confidentiality and responsible handling of the data material (recordings and transcripts), which the participants were verbally reassured with upon initiating the interview. Given the sensitivity of the subject of political activism, particular care was taken to remove identifying details from the transcripts.

Acknowledgement is made to my potential effect and influence on the information given by the informants, as a researcher but also as an activist (Cresswell & Cresswell 2023, pp. 226–227). Prior to or during all of the interviews, given the semi-structured approach, I engaged in conversations with the participants that gave them information of my own experiences and opinions on activism, protest actions and white overall tactics. Further acknowledgment is made to how I as a researcher am inseparable from the social interactions of the interviews and that this affects and subjectivizes this research attempts to explain the identified social patterns and phenomena in focus.

Lastly, almost all interviews were conducted in Swedish. However, since I have decided to write this study in English, the chosen quotes displayed in the results were translated by me. Although attempting to change as little as possible of the original sentence structures and personal word choices, I acknowledge that slight changes might have occurred unintentionally in the process of translating the quotes from one language to another.

5. Results

In the following chapter the results from the five semi structured interviews will be presented. Based on the information provided by the interviewees, this chapter will be structured as a discussion on white overalls in protest actions where its functions and forms, symbolisms and repetitions are highlighted and compared for the most part centered around different protest actions and campaigns between 2000 and 2025, with some deviations of accounts of white overall actions before 2000 as well as speculations about the future. This storyline over circa 25 years also includes more theoretical discussions with less specific references to particular actions that came up when more broadly discussing white overall tactics.

5.1 Emergence of white overalls in protest actions

Although the first uses of white overalls in protest actions before the 1990s are for the most parts vague recollections before the interviewees own participations' in white overall protests, Informant D and B remember some early white overall tactics that would be imported into their own movements later on. According to them, two parallel movements used the white overall in protest action. Here the symbolism of the suit was its primary purpose, although differentiating vastly. Climate activists protesting genetically modified crops and biotech would do photo friendly, civil disobedient actions wearing white overalls to highlight the hazardous croplands as well as a scientific, rational and professional look of the activists, compared to commonly dressed environmentalists. In a different sociopolitical context, in the occupied social centre movement in northern Italy, the white overall symbolised something else. It told a story of white phantoms roaming the ghost towns of neo-liberalization. Furthermore, these autonomous social centers would work as spaces of innovation of the new theories, strategies and tactics later implemented in the global justice movement: a laboratory of radical politics in Europe (Informant B).

5.2 Confrontational nonviolence: the Tute Bianche model

A well established repertoire of radical left wing politics across Europe since the 1980s was the black bloc tactic. Engaging in offensive street actions, clashing with the police or destroying property, the tactic was to mask up and wear uniformly black, to protect the participants from being identified (Informant B). Over time this tactic had to a large extent lost its novelty and effectiveness – the police had adjusted and learnt how to control black bloc protests and the media had long lost its interest in reporting on the actual messages of their campaigns.

So at some point the cops, like when I became involved in lefty radical protests in the early to mid, let's say mid nineties, the black blocs were kind of mostly a performance. [...] But on a tactical level, the police were quite, they were prepared for this type of militancy and ultimately if you want to fight the police in a sort of direct confrontation, you're most likely gonna lose. I mean they, they have more means of violence. They have the right to use any and all sorts of violence. So in the nineties, the black block tactic had really come to an end. It was no longer effective. (Informant B)

Needed then was a new tactic that broke with the performative black bloc repertoire and interacted with the police differently to be less minoritarian and more effective.

In this context grew the European Ya Basta! network, importing ideas and rhetoric from the Zapatista movement in Mexico. Developed in the autonomous social centres of northern Italy, a tactical project of the network called *Tute Bianche* (White Overalls) included protest actions where activists dressed in white overalls and self made protective padding – rubber foam, inflatable tubes, hockey gear, helmets, shields and lots of duct tape – forming soft, protected, white blocs to confront the police in an attempt to push through and break their lines, usually without offensive violence, to reach a target (Informant D). These could span from occupied houses to migrant detentions to summit meetings between the world's strongest powerholders.

Emerging in the late 1990s, the GJM protested neoliberal globalization and advocated social and climate justice for people and the environment across the world (see chapter 2.2). Including a diversity of ideologies, currents and tactics, a general openness to groups experimenting and forming new repertoires based on experiences from other movements

made possible the importing of this white overall tactic to the popular summit protests. The first time the tactic was used in this context was during the International Monetary Fund and World Bank summit in Prague, 2000:

The two functions of the white overalls in Prague were one: to change the aesthetic of radical protest away from the Black blocs [...] Like to signal a rupture in left wing militancy. And in a way also to say, well, we're not militant, we are determined, but we're not necessarily militant. And the other thing was more practical. The white overalls allowed the Tutte Bianche to cover up all the protective gear they were wearing. (Informant B)

Of the 10 000 protestors in Prague that day, around 400–500 would make out the white bloc. The protest action, with an impossible task to push riot police and watercanons across a sealed off bridge, would primarily focus on communicating its symbolism, this time of *confrontational nonviolence*, by doing media-friendly spectacular actions instead of actual effectiveness in disturbing the meeting:

We were pushing there and were pepper-sprayed and shoved and pushed against police lines that were backed up by water cannons that they never got to use. Because our methodology was not to use any kind of violence that would force the use of a water cannon. So in that way it was a pretty media effective and movement-building effective strategy. (Informant D, *my translation*)

Informant D discusses how an acceptance for a broad variety of tactics created a myriad of diverging protests across the city, from black bloc riots to white bloc non-violent confrontations, to the Reclaim The Streets dancing 'pink and silver bloc'. The identity of the white overall, easily put on and taken off based on tactical effectiveness and desired outcomes, allowed for the activists to join different blocs as the protests progressed, with some later discarding their suits to join the black bloc.

The white overall tactic, then, became a symbolic and strategic break with the black bloc repertoire (although adopting similar elements of anonymity and militancy), which was considered ineffective. Using aesthetics of contrasting color it was an initiative, a white canvas, for a new identity of leftist radical activism. It was a 'counter-symbol' with a clear message of *confrontational non-violence* as tactically effective, appealing to a broad spectrum

of varying political groups (Informant B; Informant D). According to informant D, the Tute Bianche tactic further sought to hold spaces for radical actions where new participants would have empowering experiences of political agency that would be carried on into following struggles.

Despite its break with the preceding radical identity and tactic, the overalls filled similar functions to the black bloc – using anonymity and *collective* disobedience as political tools – compared to the individual based actions of the anti-GMO movement. Here Informant D differentiate between *civil* and *collective* disobedience when describing the white overall tactic as a compromise between or alternative to offensive violence and individual sacrifice. Informant A further discuss how the developed tactic combining powerful and effective protest actions with public spokespersons and media outreach attempted to bridge the gap between civil society and the militant left:

We can move away from this division between reformism and radicality, or respectability and radicality, and get on board and thereby create a mass acceptance for what we do and maybe people take the first step there. And that has characterized the white overalls the whole time, I would say. (Informant A, *my translation*)

By combining these contradictions in a compromising form, the white overall communicated a deviation from the black bloc repertoire, while simultaneously using similar tactics. The white overalls thus became a symbol of confrontational non-violence, to be recognized by the police, media and public (Informant A; Informant D). However, witnessing the Tute Bianche protest from afar in Prague, Informant B perceived the bloc format as a slight change of the black bloc. Although visually impressive, it was still ineffective in actually overcoming the police lines.

5.2.1 Diffusion and development of the Tute Bianche model

Empowered by the action in Prague, the Finnish branch of the Ya Basta! network would use the white bloc tactic two months later to escalate the counter-protests during Finland's annual day of independence (Informant D). Using inflated and tied together inner tubes from tractor tires underneath the bloc surrounding banners, the white overall rhetoric of confrontational

nonviolence was materialized in soft, inflated balloon-like shields pushing against police, wielding batons and pepper sprays. The protest in Helsinki further functioned as a laboratory for the planned action for the approaching EU summit in Sweden the following year. Similarly, in the spring of 2001, the Ecofin summit of European finance ministers in Malmö saw white overalls in action as well (Informant A). Here however, the protest was met with violent police repression on a massive scale, something that would later be understood as a rehearsal in this case for the police methods to control this new disruptive repertoire.

Leading up to what would be known as Sweden's most violent riots in modern history, and the first time the Swedish police shot demonstrators since Ådalen 1931, Ya Basta! Helsinki took part in planning the white overall action that would attempt to disturb the EU summit in Gothenburg (Informant D). Informant B summarizes the diffusion of the white overall repertoire in a consequential order: from Italy to Finland to Sweden. Continuing the tradition of joining contrasting elements of militancy and conformity in confrontational nonviolence, the Tute Bianche tactic was once more used to organize the most radical protest action possible, while averting from unstrategic clashes with the police. Attempting to simultaneously break both 'the Swedish hegemony of anti-violence' and the escalatory, antagonistic repertoire of the European black bloc, a broad variety of groups would join the protest form:

We had a spectrum from the plowshare movement to AFA where we collaborated with everyone and worked to incorporate all those aspects around a shared rhetoric.
(Informant D, *my translation*).

Moreover, the practical functions of white overalls were once again to cover and bind the mish mash of protective gear worn underneath the suits (Informant B). However the spread of this novel protest tactic was considered too radical by the Swedish police, leading them to draw extreme measures to decrease the mobilizing potential of the white overall (Informant D; Informant A; Informant B). Thus, the planned action was obstructed by the events at Hvitfeldtska Gymnasiet where 'the white overalls' among 450 activists were staying. On the morning of the first day of the summit the police surrounded the building with over 200 containers, effectively boxing in all activists preparing for three days of protests, meetings and events. However, despite the unexpected and pressured situation, the white overall repertoire proved useful in the following attempts to collectively break the siege of the school with Ya

Basta! as the spear head followed by the black bloc. The white bloc–black bloc dynamic would serve as mutual protection and potential for self defending violence when the order to arrest everyone at the school caused mounted police to attempt to ride into the demonstration in a cramped space. Informant D sums the events at Hvitfeldtska Gymnasiet as follows:

And that it was so important for the Swedish state to precisely crush what we represented, that had kept a distance from the black bloc and where like AFA interestingly enough from its own position had approached our rhetoric around like non-escalation. Or that we ourselves place our level of intensity [...] And so in the end it became us who protested against the repression and the encirclement of Hvidthfledska because it was us who felt like we could take the risk. Our method was ready to be used also in pretty observed or controlled spaces because we considered it to be nonviolent and non-escalating. (Informant D, *my translation*)

Again, the powerful communicative symbolism and practical functions of white overall tactic seems favourable to a variety of political contexts where even extremely unpredicted situations may be handled or at least somewhat controlled by the protestors, despite impending repression.

Larger numbers of disobedient protesters might in other words mean the police responding with increased violence to attempt to control the crowd. This is also a strategy actively used in white overall protests (Informant C; Informant E). The spectacle of a peaceful, or at least not offensively violent, group of whitedressed activists being brutalized by dark riot police is a media-friendly method to highlight the contrasts between nonviolent protestors and violent oppressors and convey their message to the world. However, Informant E recounts a scepticism to the repertoire's passivity in the face of brutal police violence. A tactic that publicly renounces all offensive violence and assures passivity while engaging in confrontations with an opponent possessing monopoly on violence is a tendency of martyrism that does not appeal to potential participants who would rather not get beaten up for the sake of media attention.

The Tute Bianche tactic would see its prime during the massive GJMs counter-summit protests across Europe. As seemingly all repertoires develop however, the novelty and effectiveness of the white bloc would ultimately diminish over time. Informant B explain the

political context of the early–mid 2000s that would lead to the end of the movement and a temporary discontinuance of the white overall repertoire:

9/11 meant that radical policing, radical protest, was just being policed much more brutally. Also, the response to our protests became ever more effective. Like in Gothenburg they used those, you know, line the sand filled container, the containers, which is like, ‘wow, that’s a really good idea. Fuck you.’ And so. By the time, the last big action the movement had in Glen Eagles at a Scottish G7, the G7 summit in Scotland in 2005, we were already completely ineffective. So basically all our actions starting kind of from 2002 were just kind of, they maybe looked nice and radical, but you never got anywhere. You didn’t blockade anything. You just felt disempowered. (Informant B)

The GJM had organised most of its summit counter protests in bloc structures, from less to more militant, which were more or less likely to clash with the police. However, during the summit in Heiligendamm 2007, the *five finger* tactic was imported from the German anti-nuclear movement, developed not on the streets of big cities but on the fields and in the forests of rural Germany – using the openness of the surrounding environment to their advantage (Informant B; Informant A). These environmentalists would target large infrastructures, such as train tracks, that are difficult for a limited police force to defend if an overwhelming amount of activists simultaneously charge past them. To utilize this, instead of bloc structured actions, the demonstration was therefore divided into smaller *fingers* that could split away and fan out over larger areas to exhaust police capacities, forcing them to focus on one or a few groups while others continue on. Instead of confrontations with the police, the five finger tactic aimed on the decided target behind them, focusing on the gaps in the police lines. This new model would interact with established traditions, transforming the repertoires of radical activism in a movement with diminishing momentum. Further, the determination of the finger strategy aligned with the Tute Bianche tactic of finding a favourable compromise between militancy and pacifism, but with a novel and more effective protest structure. The transformation of the tactic was now *determined* instead of *confrontational* nonviolence – determined to overcome all obstacles on the way to the target, from police lines to fences and walls without violent means.

However, the white bloc tactic did not vanish entirely with the GJM. Its import to the house occupation movement in Lund resulted in an unexpected continuation of the protest form.

Here the differences between determined (as in the case of five finger actions) and confrontational (as in Prague and Gothenburg) non-violence are somewhat vague. Drawing inspiration from both traditions, based on activists implementing their experiences from Malmö, Gothenburg and Heiligendamm to this political context, the tactic in Lund seemingly used smaller finger structures to engage in confrontations with the police, using shields but no protective padding or helmets (Informant A). On the 16th of May 2009 (reconnecting with the first house occupation in Sweden's modern history 40 years prior, in the same town) the *Occupation Festival* gathered 1 000 people who would take part in actions to occupy several houses across the town. Blocs organized in color codes, some in white overalls, attempted to seize buildings across the city, with different levels of repression and success. The tactic applied was in alliance with the TB campaign of open communication with the media as well as confrontational nonviolence. According to several of the interviewees, the white overall repertoire emphasizes its messages and rhetoric through the press. Spectacular actions gaining media attention might reach international audiences, however a repertoire relying on media also runs the risk of quickly becoming old news:

We were pretty successful in our media work then. I think that regular Lund residents and middle class Lund residents were pretty sympathetic towards the idea that there is a housing shortage and why wouldn't you be allowed to live in an empty house? What's the problem with that? Later, however, we ended up totally out of the media spotlight and that's one of the problems with relying a little on the media. It's partly that they start to ignore the things we did. Then you're just walking into a house and getting arrested.
(Informant A, *my translation*)

Expanding on this, Informant A discuss the dilemma of nonviolence and how the compromise between militancy and pacifism over time risk either turning passive and tactically ineffective, accepting repression but upholding perceived legitimacy in the eyes of the public, or turning minoritarian when resorting to more violent means to gain and protect material victories.

5.3 Determined nonviolence: the Ende Gelände model

After the GJM of the 2000, and political flops of the actual summits, radical social and climate justice groups were faced with the issue of not only developing new and effective focuses, tactics and rhetorics, but also finding new spaces to engage in. Informant B describes

the time of the United Nations Climate Change Conferences failed COP summits as a lowpoint of the European climate movement. The need for mass actions in other spaces than outside of summits in cities sparked motivation for experimenting with new protest forms by implementing experiences and lessons from previous movements, tactics and actions. As previously discussed, groups in social movements usually possess less resources than other political groups (see chapter 3.). To organize campaigns, protests and mass actions with few resources require cheap and easy obtainable means and spaces to gather participants. A protest camp is one option European anticapitalist, antiracist and climate groups commonly have gone with. In contrast with the alter-globalisation movement mobilizing against the meetings of politicians and bureaucrats, CEO's and generals of the world's largest powers, the growing CJM used the camp structure to protest these world powers' environmentally destructive industries *at* their points of extraction (Informant E). These spaces became the needed laboratories for new action models that would come to be.

Perhaps the most acknowledged and influential action model including white overalls is the strategy of Ende Gelände. Developed by the radical justice group in Germany around 2015 the suits was now used in blockades and occupations of brown coal mines and infrastructure across the country. During the 2010s radical climate groups in Germany had previously done small-scale anti-coal actions targeting the industry, such as occupying coal pits and diggers, with a few hundred participants. However the initiative of EG around 2015 would drastically change the momentum of the European CJM, gaining attraction from radical activists that previously had discarded the climate issue as lost, or too difficult to mobilize around.

Designing a model that combined the five finger tactic with white overalls, the strategy of EG became *determined nonviolence*, again combining elements of radicality with conformity that communicated determination to the cause without offensiveness towards the police. This format would attract thousands to engage in disruptive mass actions targeting the coal industry while communicating the legitimacy of their struggle. In 2015, the world would see the first EG action with what would become its trademark – white overalls into dark coalpits:

Like we're nonviolently using our bodies to stop climate catastrophe. I mean, that's essentially the story. So the way Ende Gelände was designed was essentially to make it an attractive action, even though it's a radical action in content and in its demands. It was supposed to be attractive so that it would kind of be cool, right? That being a climate activist would be seen as sort of cool. Which was almost the exact opposite.

Like being a climate activist was like the least cool thing you could be on the radical left. Being an anti-fascist or anti-racist was like, way cooler. And then Ende Gelände kind of changed that partly because of the action model. (Informant B)

Incorporating traditions from its predecessors white overalls were again strategically used as a central element of the tactic, for its function – collective anonymity, protection from coal dust – and its form – collective identity, and communication of radicality yet peacefulness and rationality (as seen in the anti-GMO and global justice movement) (Informant B; Informant E). Instead of a diversity of tactics in different autonomous blocs, the EG model used coordinated finger structures (from the anti-nuclear movement), uniformly dressed in white overalls, all determined to reach their target through nonviolent means. Thus, the white overall was both a practical tool as well as a communicative symbol to draw attention to their new campaign. By recycling the distinctive aesthetic, associated with the white blocs of the summit protests, EG created symbolic resonances between the GJM and CJM.

A noticeable change between the Tute Bianche and Ende Geländes tactic is how the confrontational element with foam pad armor, shields and bloc structure pushing against police lines, has been swapped with determined non-violence and five finger tactics, seeking the gaps between the obstacles to effectively reach planned target (Ibid.). The shields and soft armour is taken off for both practical and visual reasons indicating that the group is not actively seeking clashes with the police.

Several informants discuss how the white overall in mass actions serves as a tool to empower its wearers to more disruptive forms of protest, while strategically maintaining the security of participants and the narrative and motivations for nonviolence and urgency of the cause (Informant A; Informant B; Informant E). Informant E sees these collective experiences of effective mass actions in EG's protests as the main reason why the white overall repertoire has spread to subsequent groups across the continent. Combining the internal solidarity between participants united in collective uniformity and anonymity with the adventurousness of five finger tactics, the EG model created spaces for activists to experience collective and empowering joy:

I mean, just like everybody else, you know, what do you do? We wanna do exciting and fun things everywhere. And, and in a way, the Five Fingers tactic has quite a bit of that,

has more excitement and fun than just a regular sit down blockade, but is a lot less scary and dangerous than a classic riot. So that's why it has, I think, spread so much as a tactic. (Informant B)

Informant E further discusses how the powerful contrasts of activists in white overalls blocking vast, dark coal mines was used to reach international attention through the media. Behaving disciplined and uniformly, determined to overcome all obstacles and using their own bodies to fight climate destruction, while wearing strange, white suits communicates that the dark fossil industry, not the activists, is the antagonist in this dynamic:

It's not this that you think around these demonstrations that 'oh it's a demonstration that they've arranged, then a bunch of troublemakers from strange directions show up.' No, here it's so clear that everyone is participating on the same premises, on the same foot or whatever you call it. I think that is something that makes it easier to get through. [...] these like cute white dressed, especially if you have clothes under you really become like a rubber michelin ball, sort of. I think the purely esthetical contrast between that image and these enormous dug out holes also gave a very, very strong image. (Informant E, *my translation*).

5.3.1 Diffusion of the Ende Gelände model

The massive influence Ende Gelände has had on strategies of subsequent climate justice and adjacent groups can be traced through a myriad of direct actions across Europe (Informant A; Informant C; Informant E). Evident here is the repetition of EG's model of the white overall as a practical and communicative tool, five finger tactics and climate camp structure, becoming signifiers of radical actions of this cycle of the CJM.

Intending to intervene in and radicalize the at the time massive climate movement, from symbolic demonstrations to disruptive mass actions, the Take Concrete Action campaign targeted the cement industry in Gotland 2022 and a pulp factory in Gävle 2024, signifying an import of the EG model to Sweden (Informant A). Here, the white overall and determined nonviolence model constituted an accessible form of radical protest action for a new generation of activists unfamiliar with militant politics. Moreover, the recognition of EG's successful actions in Germany increased the perceived potential of the model in this similar context.

Moreover, the adjacent Palestine solidarity movement would also continue the white overall repertoire in the struggle against European companies transporting arms to Israel, enabling the Genocide in Palestine (Informant C). In 2025 the headquarters of the transport and logistics company Mærsk in Copenhagen was blockaded by 800 activists wearing white overalls and moving in finger formations under the action slogan *Cut Ties with Genocide*.

Participating in the blockade, Informant C reflects on the visual contrasts of peaceful, white clad activists brutally beaten by dark riot police as a strategic display of nonviolence to communicate the justness of the cause and the disruptive protest form to the media and general public. In alliance with the Ende Gelände transformation of the white overall tactic, in Copenhagen 2025 the foam padding and helmets have been taken off to highlight this oppositionality:

We could've had helmets, but that looks different. And then I think they prepare themselves in another way. You look more peaceful without protection. But it depends on your tactic. [...] It's also a pretty gentle color in comparison with like black police dogs and police with their armored uniforms when they have put on their helmets and everything. (Informant C, *my translation*)

Several informants discuss how the esthetic of the white overall might affect the levels of repression applied to the action (Informant C; Informant E) Compared to black blocs, white overalls are perceived as less threatening which makes police repression against them less easy to justify, even though they practice the same or similar tactics. Therefore, the white uniform's breaking with the black bloc repertoire, as with previous cases, was favourable here as well. Further, Informant C notes how the uniform of white overalls unify the different activists participating in the protest action:

It's very interesting, when you get there also there's always two blocs that are going to the demo, those who are black dressed and those who are like, that are going to a climate demonstration, that have knitted scarfs. And then everyone puts on these suits and everyone looks the same. (Informant C, *my translation*)

The practical possibilities to dispose of the uniformal attire after completed action (disregarding the environmental unsustainability of one time use articles) along with face covering masks further provides protection from substances such as coal dust or tear gas, as

well as collective anonymity lowering risks of being identified and repressed when taking part in unlawful direct actions (Informant B; Informant C; Informant E). This is also an act of solidarity for international participants or others that might face harsher repression from the police.

5.4 Stagnation of the white overall tactic

Throughout its uses in protest actions, the white overall has filled different functions and held different meanings. Although its varied uses over time and space, several points stand out as continuous throughout its development, uses and transformations when following its path through the histories of European social and environmental justice movements. Informant D describes how the white overall as a practical attire also become the rhetorical symbols in social movements – political tools that play a part in shaping the forms and identities of protest groups:

The identity and quality of the political tool has effects on the rhetoric you use and for how you understand politics. And there the white overalls are a good example. [...]
When you create and build identities, which always is an active process, it's like you work with what you have and you have to be ready to write in the meanings you need in there to create consensus or break consensus. (informant D, *own translation*)

During the interview, several informants discussed the current situation of the white overall repertoire, noting a decline in its effectiveness and novelty. Informant A and Informant E reflects on the diminishing potential of future white overall protests, considering how the tactic is starting to become predictable for the police and old news for the media:

The novelty here has started to disappear because it's a lot like this with police and the media to some degree, that things they haven't seen before they're very, very bad at dealing with, and, or create a lot of attention and you can get a feeling at least, subjective or objective, that you win quite a lot. (Informant A, *my translation*)

And further:

And there I think the white overall in some way isn't so new and groundbreaking as it once was but perhaps you may need to consider a new practice to get the same effect that you got ten years ago. [...] I think some aspects of it, like the unity, may be left but the benefit to face an opponent in a white overall, perhaps that isn't as effective any more. (Informant E, *my translation*)

Over time the white overall model has become a habitual routine of mass actions rather than a strategically chosen tactic in consideration to political context and desired outcomes, Informant A and Informant E argue. Primarily then, the white overall is no longer as powerful of a tool as it once was, and remaining is the internal functions of a collective identity. Informant B discusses the difficulties of applying the EG model in city environments. The five finger tactic was developed to use space to exert police capacities and when the surroundings are more cramped, the second option is speed, which makes the action less predictable. Furthermore, in an urban context, the practical function of hazmat suits are no longer as evident. Sticking to the same model as developed by EG in other contexts is therefore perceived by informant E as a ritualization of a once effective model.

There was some type of practical function to have these overalls when you were going down into mines, but when we were going to occupy gas terminals and train tracks and these types of things there wasn't the practical function and then it was like it became a fetishism, sort of. Like that you fetishize this suit and that it became a little bit like a performance or a little bit ritual of it. You had it because it was expected that you were going to have it. (Informant E, *my translation*)

Informant A continues reflecting on how the white overall repertoire is passed down to younger generations of activists through experience of protest actions, and further how this long lasting tradition has decreased the possibilities for more militant tactics later on. As police learn the previously unknown and therefore effective tactic, it becomes increasingly difficult to motivate continuing the same repertoire. The element of nonviolence becomes ineffective when determination to abstain from more militant means, such as sabotage and property destruction, result in ineffectiveness (Informant A; Informant E). This has sparked some innovations of new concepts such as *civil disobedience plus* that includes sabotage and property destruction under the umbrella of determined nonviolence. However, in the cases where these initiatives are implemented, the white overalls have been taken off, constituting a break with the white overall repertoire.

6. Discussion

The following chapter will elaborate on the informants' discussions, stories and experiences presented in the previous chapter in relation to the theoretical framework provided by Charles Tilly, Ernesto Castañeda and Lesley J. Wood as well as Donatella della Porta and Mario Diani (see chapter 3. theoretical framework) (2020; 2020).

The white overall repertoire has been imported to several different contexts and movements across Europe, from Italy to the Czech Republic, Finland, Sweden and Denmark. Several other European countries have also seen white overalls in protest actions, as made evident by the informants. However, the results and following discussion is limited to some significant protest actions that the five activists interviewed have participated in, and these took place in these mentioned countries. The discussion will compare the action models of the Italian sub-group to the Ya Basta! network Tute Bianche and the German climate justice alliance Ende Gelände, identified as the main contributors to the development, transformation and diffusion of the white overall repertoire, and further examine their similarities and differences, purposes, advantages and limitations in the use in other protest actions across these countries. Moreover, the purpose of this discussion is to answer the two research questions:

- What are the practical and communicative functions of the white overall in Tute Bianche and Ende Gelände's protest models?
- How has the white overall repertoire been developed, transformed and diffused across European social and climate justice groups between 2000 and 2025?

6.1 White bloc, black bloc: rupture, collaboration and convergence

A recurring theme in the interviews is the relationship between the repertoires of white overalls and black blocs. Historically, the emergence of Tute Bianche's white bloc is understood by several informants as a counter-symbol, signaling a rupture with the perceived ineffective and ritualized black bloc tactic. While keeping several beneficial elements of anonymity and a confrontational stance towards the police, the white bloc explicitly rejected

offensive violence as an ineffective method for radical politics. The commitment to nonviolence was thus strategically considered to make militant protest actions accessible to a broader spectrum of activists, groups and ideologies within the global justice movement. The fluidity between the white overall and black bloc tactics are evident throughout the interviews. In most of these cases, black bloc practitioners adopt and take off the overalls, based on strategic considerations. During the summit protests in Prague 2000 and Gothenburg 2001, the coexistence and collaboration of the white and black blocs exemplify the broad acceptance of a diversity of tactics. In Prague for example, activists even moved between the blocs, taking off their suits to participate in the nearby riot based on desires and strategic consideration, according to informant D. Similar is the case in the house occupation movement in Lund. Further, in Gothenburg, the collaboration of the two blocs would be mutually beneficial in a highly pressured situation where the police attempted to repress both. This dynamic underscores that the protest repertoires were not exclusive or fixed traditions, but evolving strategic tools for contentious politics, in support of della Porta and Diani's view (2020, pp. 182–188). However, in the cases after the repertoires transformation to the EG model, the presence of the black bloc as an actor for collaboration has become less evident. Instead the mass actions of EG, Take Concrete Action and Cut Ties with Genocide have become uniformly white.

As discussed by several informants, the white overall models of both TB and EG have been created in spaces of experimentation. For TB, the 'laboratory' was the occupied social centres in Italy and for EG it was the climate camps across Europe. These have allowed for a development near the well known traditions of established tactics, as explained by della Porta and Diani (2020, p. 182–188).

6.2 Practical and communicative functions

As shown throughout the conducted interviews, the white overall has for the most part filled the same practical functions throughout its course over time and space. These include anonymity, protection from substances such as coal dust and tear gas, cheap and wide availability and the external visual of collective unity. These practical aspects support della Porta and Diani's argument that protest forms are shaped not only by active choices but also the material conditions and constraints of social movements (2020, pp. 182–188).

In addition to its practical functions, the white overall is also a communicative tool. Drawing on the concept of displays of *WUNC* – worthiness, unity, numbers and commitment – as developed by Tilly et al., the white overall serves to communicate all four to the onlooker (2020, pp. 6–7). Mass actions of hundreds to thousands participants all wearing white, clean uniforms, facing repression while pointing to the urgency of their cause all signal WUNC to the police, the media and the general public, the main entities interacted with based on the informants' discussions.

Moreover, the power of the white overall symbolism can also be understood in relation to the dualist mind of the Western world, described by Buckingham (2020:18–23). As reflected in the empirical data, the color white is associated with peace, rationality, legitimacy and righteousness. In contrast, the opponents, from riot police to coal mines, turn utterly dark: violent, unjust and immoral. As discussed earlier, in relation to the black bloc, the white overall similarly became a sort of counter-symbol. White overall tactics can thus be understood to utilize the hierarchical worldview that in part has made possible the exploitative, oppressive and extractivist systems they aim to disrupt. The spectacle of white clad protestors peacefully resisting repression from armored riot police is a media-friendly strategy that highlights this oppositionality. This is a signifying method throughout the repertoire.

6.3 Mass mobilizing potential

The results of this study highlight the function of the white overall as a unifying protest form capable of mobilizing a broad spectrum of activists, from pacifists to militants. In line with Tilly as well as della Porta and Diani's theories of contentious politics and protest repertoires, the white overall constitutes a developed and diffused protest form that lowers the threshold for activists to participate in collective disruptive actions. Both the TB and EG models show how the white overall as a practical and communicative tool has been used in several contexts to mobilize impactful mass actions, shutting down summits and industrial infrastructure as well as occupying coal mines and company headquarters.

Further, the practical uniform creates an internal collective identity of its wearers, fostering feelings of solidarity, courage and empowerment through sheer numbers, anonymity and the

almost cosplay-like suit. Recycled from the TB tactic for the powerful memory of these feelings, EG further contributed to this powerful imagery as an identifying symbol of disruptive social and climate justice actions in Europe. Used in their action models of confrontational and later determined nonviolence, would further contribute to the perceived cementation of the protest form of the overall. These associations explain the diffusion of the repertoire across the continent and how it has remained intrinsically associated with militant yet nonviolent tactics, in support of della Porta and Diani's theory of protest repertoires as cultural socializing tools (2020, pp. 182–188).

6.4 The limits of nonviolence

Although central to the appeal of the white overall repertoire, the commitment to nonviolence is also one of the contested aspects throughout its development, transformation and diffusion across European social and climate justice groups. This vow is embodied in the soft, rubber foam and cardboard armored suits of the TB model and EG's determined focus on non-confrontation. The nonviolence approach relies on the media to document police repression and further spread and validate their campaigns, as discussed and problematized by several interviewees. Informant A and E raises concerns about the possible ritualization of the white overall repertoire and the limitations it entails. As the media loses interest and police adapt to the previously novel tactic, the effectiveness, unpredictability, and possibility to overwhelm the ones opponents diminishes. As the police – possessing a monopoly on violence – learn to efficiently predict and respond to the unchanging tactic, or further escalate repression, to always remain nonviolent not only becomes ineffective but ultimately risks the campaign, group or movement to fall into demise. This course of events can be seen in the fall of the GJM and the end of the TB model. Informant E argues that, as the practical functions and effectiveness of the white overall decline, left is only the symbolism.

Further in alignment with della Porta and Diani's understanding of the repertoire as a cultural resource for subsequent movements, the white overall repertoire as a memory of successful strategies in the past, has thus shaped the form of contemporary radical protest actions (2020, pp. 182–188). In the case of the Cut Ties with Genocide action, several informants discuss how, given the EG model's limitation in urban environments, the appliance of white overalls may be of esthetical choice and cultural tradition, rather than strategic consideration.

The fixation of the white overall symbolism of nonviolence is thus perceived by some informants to constrain its adaptability to a changing political context. Further, the commitment to nonviolence is so intrinsically associated with the overall by all informants that the possibility of introducing higher levels of militancy (such as sabotage and property destruction) does not seem possible while the suits remain. In the cases where experimentation with more escalatory forms of protests has been done, such as *civil disobedience plus* introduced by Informant E, the overalls have therefore been taken off. However, Informant A speculates that for a younger generation socialized in the white overall repertoire as the most radical protest tactic, these alternatives are not perceived as accessible, as discussed by della Porta and Diani (2020, pp. 182–188).

Simultaneously the continued use of white overalls in the contemporary climate justice and adjacent Palestine solidarity movements actions in Europe reflects the perceived interconnectedness of social and environmental struggles. The merging of these movements in Copenhagen 2025 suggests that the overall still functions as a unifying symbol across intersected struggles. **This aligns with della Porta?** Through the white uniform, activists from different social and climate justice orientations unite as a collective body opposing the oppressive and extractivist processes and structures of the globalized capitalist system.

6.5 Conclusions and the future of combining contrasts

Over the trajectory of over 25 years, white overalls in protest actions constitute a contextually flexible yet internally coherent protest repertoire of European social and climate justice groups. While its specific practical uses and communicated meanings have varied between groups, movements and protest cycles, several characteristics of the repertoire has remained continuously throughout its history: its role as a compromise between militancy and nonviolence, radicality and conformity; and symbolism of highlighting the dichotomies between peaceful and violent, reason and affect, right and wrong, white and black. These different contrasting extreme and moderate elements, internally combined in a favourable form (confrontational or determined nonviolence), as well as externally highlighting them in the interactions between activists and their opponents (white clad peaceful activists versus dark riot police or coal industry) has further made possible its mass mobilizing potential of

activists from a broad spectrum of traditions, ideologies and movements. Advantageously utilizing these dualities, the white overall repertoire has become an internal symbol of united plurality of radical mass actions in a (brightly) colorful struggle for social and climate justice. These characteristics give some explanations to the longevity of the repertoire as well as the ongoing debate about its novelty, effectiveness and potential in the contemporary sociopolitical European context.

Signaling novelty, effectiveness and a rupture with stagnating repertoires in its compromise between the contrasts of militancy and nonviolence, the overall was a new canvas for radical politics of the GJM at the turn of the millennium, as well as the CJM 15 years later. However, in the contemporary context of the accelerating polycrisis and escalating repression against those who attempt to resist it, the perceived stagnation of the white overall repertoire as described by the interviewees raises questions for the future of radical activism in Europe. Based on the Informants discussions on the future, needed is yet again a novel protest tactic, mobilizing a broad spectrum of participants in radical mass actions that can materially disrupt the status quo while maintaining the focus of the media, gaining support from the general public and avoiding escalating repression from the police. Whether this will result in a recycle of the unity in plurality approach, dynamic collaborations of white and black blocs or something completely different that breaks the longlasting repertoire of the white overall is difficult to say. However, looking at the development, transformation and diffusion of the white overall repertoire across the continent since the 1990s to the current day, might provide some suggestions on favourable, although perhaps contradictory, elements to be combined in this novel, effective, mass mobilizing and radical action model for the future.

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8. Appendix

Interview guide

