

INDIGNATION AS AFFECTIVE TRANSFORMATION: AN AFFECT-THEORETICAL APPROACH TO THE BELGIAN YELLOW VEST MOVEMENT*

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In social movement research, indignation features prominently as an affect that triggers protest and mobilization. Yet, scholarly accounts rarely unpack the precise ways in which indignation performs these roles, and how it transforms individuals who join mobilization. This article conceptualizes indignation as a moment of affective transformation, based on affect-theoretical insights and drawing on the empirical analysis of the Belgian yellow vest movement (BYV). Building on focus groups, participant observations, and interviews, we unpack the complex affectivity of indignation and the dynamics that underlie indignation in the context of protest and mobilization. We find that indignation enables three affective transformations: (1) it acts as a tipping point that follows from individual feelings of resentment; (2) it is a moment of affective resonance that binds individuals in affective communities, (3) it acts as affective bifurcation from the disempowered state of fear and towards the reclaiming of political power.

Affect and emotions have become increasingly important in social movements studies (Flam and King 2005; Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta 2001; Jasper 2018; Van-Ness and Summers-Effler 2019). This attention is part of the “affective turn” in social sciences, a paradigmatic shift that seeks to better integrate affective processes and dynamics in political research (e.g., Clough and Halley 2007; Marcus 2002). Among the many affects and emotions that intervene in social movements and mobilization, indignation features prominently as a central affect of protest and resistance (Jasper 2014; 2018; Taylor 2019), and a raw material of revolt and rebellion (Hardt and Negri 2009; Lordon 2016a).

Since the cycle of protests in 2011 and Southern Europe’s anti-austerity manifestations (e.g., the 15M movement, *Los Indignados*), several studies have focused on indignation specifically (e.g., Castells 2015; Gerbaudo 2017; Jasper 2014a), emphasizing its importance in contemporary social movements. However, despite the centrality it gained in recent years, indignation itself, its affective dynamics and dimensions, are often left underconceptualized. In particular, social movements scholars have often examined indignation as a particular form of moral anger; one that triggers protest and intervenes in processes of collective identification (Benski and Langman 2013; Jasper 2014; Perugorria and Tejerina 2013). Yet, the precise ways in which indignation performs these roles are often taken for granted.

We develop a more fine-grained conceptualization of indignation based on recent affect-theoretical perspectives and by drawing on the empirical context of the Belgian yellow vest movement (2018-2019). By interweaving conceptual and empirical analyses, we unravel the affective dynamics and dimensions of indignation that underlie the moments where people decide to “rise-up and get going” (Bensaïd 2001).

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Our findings reveal that, contrary to scholarly accounts that confine indignation to a form of moral anger only, indignation is better conceived as a combination of emotions and, ultimately, as a passage from a sense of powerlessness and inaction to increased feelings of agency and empowerment. We first reveal indignation's complex affectivity, which includes disdain and hate towards an oppressor, love and compassion for similar others, and pre-existing feelings of resentment and fear. In turn, we show how this complex affectivity informs us on indignation's transformative, empowering effects in the context of protest and mobilization. More specifically, we reveal that indignation enables three interrelated affective transformations: (1) indignation acts as a tipping point at the individual level; a culmination of resentful feelings and exasperation which shifts individuals from powerlessness to active participation; (2) at the collective level, indignation involves a process of affective resonance where individuals share their grievances with others, target a common culprit, and become part of broader affective communities, (3) at the level of power relations with political institutions, indignation acts as moment of affective bifurcation; it shifts individuals from the disempowered state of fear to the reclaiming of political power. Our findings also reveal the circular and cumulative relation that ties these three levels together. Once a tipping point is reached (1) and shared with others (2), indignation's affective resonance may, in turn, trigger further tipping points, and more affective resonance. Together, these produce a bifurcation (3) in individual and collective relationships with political institutions, through the articulation of democratic claims that go beyond indignant grievances only.

Our analysis is rooted in recent theories of the so-called affective turn which cut across various disciplines of social sciences and humanities (Clough and Halley 2007; Lordon 2016a; Marcus 2002; Stolze 2019; Taylor 2019; Tucker 2018). More specifically, we draw on the concept of affective arrangement (Slaby and von Scheve 2019) to seize the multiple ways in which indignation intervenes in the context of protest and mobilization, particularly in terms of heightened agentive capacities and empowerment. To conduct our analysis, we draw on observations, interviews and focus groups with participants of the Belgian Yellow Vest movement (hereafter BYV) (November 2018 to December 2019). This movement provides a relevant empirical case for our study: it has been recognized for its affective explicitness (Morales, Ionescu, Guegan, and Tavani 2020) that revolve, amongst others, around feelings of moral anger and hurt dignity, but also for embodying a moment of empowerment against dominant political institutions, through the articulation of radical democratic demands.

THEORY

For a long time, emotions and affects lived a shadow existence in the field of social movement studies. Their absence was part of how this field built its legitimacy (Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta 2001: 48), because emotions were mainly seen as irrational behaviour. Models of collective action were at best talking about how to domesticate emotions, when acknowledging their existence at all (Sommier 2010). However, following the affective turn in social sciences (Clough and Halley 2007; Marcus 2002; Traïni 2009) and faced with a political reality that is pervaded with emotions (Wahl-Jorgensen 2019; Cossarini and Vallespin 2019), researchers of all fields started paying a renewed attention to affects and emotions to approach contemporary political reality.

A Turn to Affects and Emotions in Social Movements Studies

In the field of social movements and mobilization, scholars have taken a variety of approaches to better include affects and emotions in their analyses. Some have followed an approach akin to a "sociology of emotions" and "mapping of emotions" (e.g., Flam and King 2005), while other scholars draw on an understanding of affect rooted in a relational ontology (e.g., Knudsen and Sage 2015; Lordon 2016a; Slaby and von Scheve 2019; Taylor 2019). Whilst the former strand of literature has tended to focus, broadly speaking, on the roles of emotions per se, for example, as drivers of mobilization and demobilization, or as resources

that sustain loyalty inside a movement (e.g., Van Ness and Summers-Effler 2019: 413), the latter emphasizes the relational ontology of affect by looking at how emotions drive people to protest, but also at how protest re-affects people in return (e.g., Ayata and Harders 2019; Lordon 2016a). Under this second approach, affect is defined as a broader conceptual category than individual emotional states: it is conceived as “relational dynamics between evolving bodies in a setting, thus contrasting with approaches to affect as inner states, feelings, or emotions” (Slaby and Mühlhoff 2019: 27). As Papacharissi summarizes (2015: 15), “Emotion is subsumed within affect, and perhaps the most intense part of affect. Yet affect itself extends beyond feeling as a general way of sense making. It informs our general sensibility toward the world surrounding us.”

These scholarly traditions have taken the field of social movement research in different directions, yet they have also converged in fluid ways. This is the case of Jasper’s concept of “feeling-thinking” (Jasper 2014b: 23), which captures the fluid and relational dynamics between emotion and cognition at the heart of affective processes. A similar conclusion can be drawn from Gould’s *Moving Politics* (2009) which emphasizes the transformative and shaping roles of emotions in the gay and lesbian community during the early AIDS crisis. Here, Gould uses the concept of “emotional habitus” (derived from Bourdieu’s seminal concept) to understand the transformational dynamics inside the movements. In particular, Gould shows how fear, shame and grief fused with pride inside the LGBT movement and were transformed into anger to shape political action (Kane 2010). Here again, we find a dynamic and relational account of emotions in the context of protest and mobilization.

In this article, we elaborate a conceptualization of affect that draws upon these scholarly traditions and developments. In particular, we treat affect as a dynamic concept that encompasses both individual emotional states and—crucially—the relations, transformations, and actions that these emotions elicit, especially in terms of empowerment and agency (Slaby and von Scheve 2019; Stolze 2019; Taylor 2019; Tucker 2018).

Affect, Power, Protest: The Concept of Affective Arrangement

As summarized by Slaby and Mühlhoff, affect “designates specifically those encounters between bodies that involve a change—either enhancement or diminishment—in their respective micropowers; an “increase or decrease of agentive and existential capacities in relation to their surroundings and all other actors and entities present in a situation” (Slaby and Mühlhoff 2019: 27). To be sure, in the context of this article, we understand the concepts of “agentive capacities” and agency as part and parcel of the broader notion of empowerment, not as synonymous notions (to clarify the links between agency and empowerment, see Drydyk 2013; Ozkazanc-Pan 2018).

Concretely, this means that affect designates how emotions impact our feelings of agency, power and our capacity to act. Some emotions may have empowering or “activating” effects (active affects), while others may work in the opposite direction by displaying a more disempowering and “de-activating” potential (passive affects).¹ Contemporary scholars have taken stock of the intimate relation between affect, emotions and power by looking at how certain emotions “increase” individual agentive capacities in the form of political participation (e.g., Valentino, Brader, Groenendyck, Gregorowicz and Hutchings 2011). In this context, some affects specifically, for example indignation, are singled out as activating certain forms of protest, resistance, and collective action (Castells 2015; Gerbaudo 2017; Jasper 2014a). Other scholars have looked at how emotions explain why individuals maintain their participation in social movements over time, under the so-called paradox of “persistent participation” (van Sketelenburg and Klandermans 2013). Others show how combinations of emotions—moral batteries of “negative” and “positive” emotions—influence the direction of action (Jasper 2011; 2012) and “lay out a basic strategy for many movements of the oppressed” (Jasper 2018: 138). Finally, scholars have also studied how multiple emotions combine under broader “affectivities” (Capelos and Demertzis 2018) to drive different forms of political engagement, and how social

movements can translate “negative” and stigmatized emotions into “positive” collective identities (Taylor 2000).

The idea that there are different emotions at play in processes of protest and mobilization, and that these can be “positive” or “negative” or “active” and “passive,” depending on their empowering or disempowering potential, is not unambiguous, however. Indeed, the distinctive combination of emotions and their impact on our capacity to act respond to a more situated logic: their effects largely depend on a given situation and context, individual affective trajectories, and the other actors that intervene in the dynamic of affecting and being affected. A good example in this regard is hope. Whilst one may be tempted, *a priori*, to consider hope as an activating, “empowering” affect for its ability to drive individuals towards desired their goals and ideals, recent studies also show that it can work in more negative or passive ways, by diminishing capacities to resist and contest existing practices or institutions (e.g., Terpe 2016; Knops 2021).

Contemporary affect theorists have attempted to embrace this by developing an approach that frontstages the imbrication of affect with power and agency from a situated perspective. In particular, Slaby (2019) develops the concept of “affective arrangement” (inspired by Deleuze and Guattari’s 1987 notion of *agencement*) to embrace both the multiplicity of emotions and affects that intervene in a given setting, and the distributed and situated forms of agency implied by affect (see also Nail 2017). This understanding of affective arrangements and affect “foregrounds the situatedness of affect and emotion and emphasizes the dynamic relationality of affective processes in their embodied and embedded specificity and with regard to their efficaciousness as forceful relations in various local and translocal contexts” (Slaby and von Scheve 2019: 4). The concept of affective arrangement thus directly speaks to social movements studies and the multiple power relations at play in a given context of mobilization: from the microlevel of individual lived experiences and feelings of agency, all the way to the macro-level of power relations with political institutions (e.g., Accornero 2019).

In this context, indignation features in a privileged position. On the one hand, indignation is a good example of the intimate connection between emotions and power in specific affective arrangements: it is said to both increase one’s power to act by triggering protest and intervene in the power relations that tie individuals to political institutions. On the other hand, as we will show below, indignation itself displays a complex affectivity—made of different emotions (hereafter “affective textures”)—which provides a more nuanced picture of how indignation influences agentic capacities in a given context of mobilization.

Indignation as Trigger for Protest: Multiple Affective Textures

Social movement research mostly defines indignation as the morally grounded form of anger, or a righteous form of anger in the face of injustice (Jasper 2014a; Gamson 1992). In this context, it has been described as the affective reaction that gets people to “rise-up and get going” (Bensaïd 2001 in Franquesa 2016), acting as a kind of trigger for protest. To be sure, by “trigger for protest” we mean here indignation’s role as a “motivator” for protest, i.e., motivating participation in protest and other forms of mobilization (van Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2013) which includes the action of initiating protest but also participating in ongoing movements.²

To understand more precisely how indignation acts as a “trigger” for protest, it first needs to be situated within the context of citizens’ power relations to political authorities and institutions. By power relations we mean here both representational relationships in a strict sense, as the delegation of power organized by dominant representative institutions (electoral institutions for example), but also how citizens themselves understand and imagine these relationships: the values, images and stories citizens deploy to make sense of political reality, and their place in it (see Ezrahi 2012; Taylor 2002; Van Wessel 2010). In this context, indignation intervenes when these relationships are imagined as broken; it is an affect which seeks to redress power imbalances between citizens and political authorities, as “the expression of political subjects faced with unfreedoms and injustices of power” (Hardt and Negri 2009: 235). It acts as the point of intoler-

ance where the state has lost all power over its subjects (Lordon 2016a; 2016b), and “the common affect through which citizens find the power to resist abusive power” (Lordon 2016b: 174).

Second, to seize how citizens find the power to resist abusive power and resist illegitimate political authority, one needs to further unpack indignation itself to reveal its complex affectivity. Indeed, while most common definitions of indignation tend to confine it to a form of moral anger, indignation is made of more than one emotion and displays multiple affective textures: it can be a combination of hate towards an oppressor (or an actor to blame) and love towards a victim, who has been harmed (Stolze 2019)³; it can also be composed of disgust and compassion (Cordell 2017), or be a “boiling point” (Lordon 2016a) that builds on accumulated *fears* which transform into a desire for rebellion (Stolze 2019:144-155). Elsewhere, indignation is said to be the result of pride and shame, where “shame must be transformed into pride in order to allow oppressed groups to feel indignant (Jasper, 2014a: 211-212), and in turn, produce joy and emancipation (Perrugoria and Tejerina 2013).

Overall, whilst indignation is often reduced to a form of moral or righteous anger only, its affectivity is in fact much more diverse and ambiguous; made of love, hate, disgust and compassion, and related to fear, joy and feelings of emancipation. Given that different emotions affect our agentive capacities differently, all these affective textures of indignation need to be taken into account when trying to unpack how it triggers protest and brings individuals to act collectively. Also—consistent with our situated approach to affect—the distinctive combination of affective textures of indignation, and how they influence agentive capacities (i.e., increasing individuals’ capacity to act, or reducing it), largely depend on the context of mobilization and the sociobiographical trajectories of the individual who experience it.

Indignation as Collective Affect: Affective Resonance

To further unpack the specific ways in which indignation intervenes in the context of protest and mobilization, it is important to root indignation’s complex affectivity in the sociobiographical trajectories of the individuals who express it in the first place. Here, while much emphasis is often put on the “feeling rules” at play in a given context of mobilization (Hochschild 1979) and the way indignation might be “mobilized” by social movements (e.g., Perrugoria and Tejerina 2013), it is also important to consider the lived experiences which explain the emergence of indignation in the first place. In other words: the way indignation can act as a trigger for protest depends on people’s dispositions to be moved, *affected*, by events or situations, which are rooted in their own sociobiographical trajectory (Lahire 2011; Mathieu 2010). These dispositions to be moved or affected in one or the other direction are called “affective susceptibilities” (Lordon 2016a) and “affective dispositions” (Mühlhoff 2019). They are “the sum of our entire sociobiographical trajectory and the folds and prints it has left on us” (Lordon 2016a: 24-25), and they determine both the objects and the directions of our affections. Importantly, while these affective dispositions are our own, they are also shared with others. They derive from group membership, they circulate between individuals and groups, and reach a collective dimension.

Scholars have acknowledged the importance of individual affective susceptibilities to make sense of collective identities, and movements in their entirety. In his study of the 15M movement, Franquesa emphasizes the importance of people’s personal stories to understand the movement’s claims of dignity and indignation: their feelings “toward unsettled memories and unfulfilled pasts and desire to make sense of oneself outside of the morality of capital” (2016: 69).

Indignation has a distinctive propensity to enable this shift from individual affective susceptibilities to collective ones. Indeed, by being a distinctively talkative affect (Boltanski 1993; Kaufmann 2019; Plantin, 2012), indignation is, by definition, geared to be shared with others, which creates affective contagion beyond the indignant person and carries to affective communities (Zink, 2019). As Kaufmann explains, “The indignant [person] identifies with a broader ‘We’ in the background, a community of value that is susceptible to share his or her emotion.” It draws “the contours of a collective subject, more or less temporary, more or less exclusive, but always concerned” (2019: 331).

This process of identification between individual indignant subjects and a broader collective identity takes place through “affective resonance,” a moment where individual injustices or grievances are experienced as concerning a wider group. As explained by Mühlhoff (2019: 189), affective resonance “arises through a complex interplay between the affective dispositions of multiple individuals and contextual factors within an affective arrangement.” Such a moment is described by Lordon (2010: 177) as the passing of collective thresholds of indignation and “boiling points,” where individuals no longer tolerate a given situation and coalesce in front of an offense that is, from then on, experienced as concerning all of them. This process was very clearly at play in the context of the Occupy movement, where individual indignations were surpassed by a common affect. The slogan, “I am the 99%” revealed both the particularity of one’s own situation and its resonance with others; it revealed that “my story is representative of what we are all going through, in spite of the obvious differences between us” (van de Sande 2020: 407).

In turn, it is through these moments of affective resonance that individuals recover a sense of agency and power in their relation to political institutions—what Touraine (1981) described as the control over “historicity” or the direction of social change (see Jasper 2004: 3). This means that indignation is not just a question of a “boiling point” reached individually, it also produces a “powerful sense of possibility for radical change” (Gerbaudo 2017: 7), particularly through the power of “community and the reaffirmation of an individual’s worth and dignity” (Benski and Langman 2013: 530–531).

In summary, drawing on multiple strands of the affective turn in social movement studies, we have rooted the understanding of indignation in a conceptualization of affect that is intertwined with questions of power and agency (affective arrangements). We then revealed multiple dimensions of indignation which influence agentive capacities, specifically the complex affectivity of indignation (as composed of multiple affective textures) and its propensity to bridge the gap between individual experiences and collective ones (affective resonance). In the remainder of this article, we empirically document how these intervene in the Belgian yellow vest movement (BYV) to produce what we call the “affective transformation” of indignation—and an empowering experience for BYV participants.

CONTEXT, DATA AND METHOD

Consistent with the idea that affects and emotions can only be convincingly seized from a situated approach (affective arrangements), we focus our analysis of indignation in the specific context of the Belgian yellow vest movement (BYV) (November 2018 to December 2019). This movement provides a relevant empirical case for our study of indignation. Observers have recognized its affective explicitness (Morales, Ionescu, Guegan and Tavani 2020) that revolves, amongst others, around feelings of moral anger and hurt dignity, but also embody empowerment against dominant political institutions through disruptive political practices and radical democratic demands.

Context

To understand why the BYV is a relevant empirical case for the study of indignation, and how the focus on indignation helps us to understand this complex movement, it is important to resituate the BYV within a broader context of mobilization—both geographically and from a temporal perspective.

The BYV emerged simultaneously with the original French mobilization, which started in late October 2018. Even though both movements did not reach the same mobilization potential and political impacts (with much larger protests and lasting occupations occurring in France), on both sides, the movements were seen as a reaction to “the real decay of representative government institutions” (Hayat 2018b) and the “immoral economy” (Gobin 2019; Hayat 2018a). In both the French and Belgian contexts, the yellow vest uprising provided an opportunity for contestation against the political and economic order, and for renewing or

discovering political participation in social movements (Abélès, Boncompagni and Wahnich 2020; Bendali, Challier, Della Sudda and Fillieule, 2019; Fillieule, Hayat and Monchatre 2020). Just like in France, the BYV movement was the expression of “the many political and economic dysfunctions accumulated over nearly forty years of imposed neoliberal political management” (Gobin 2019). In this regard, the yellow vest movements can be seen as following from a longer trail of protest and indignation, in the lineage of the anti-austerity movements of 2011, e.g., the 15-M Indignados movements and the Occupy movements (Ancelovici, Dufour and Nez 2016; Gerbaudo 2017). Just like in 2011, the BYV is a movement that expresses the indignation of increasing parts of the population in the face of socioeconomic inequalities, the neoliberal policies driving society, and representative institutions that “do not represent us.” In addition, and similarly to the demands for dignity observed in 2011 (Franquesa 2016; Glasius and Pleyers 2013; Perrugoria and Tejerina 2013), the yellow vest movements in Belgium and France demonstrated explicit affective repertoires, calling themselves “the anger of the people” and demanding “to live not survive”—here invoking a meaning of dignity as decent life (Nussbaum 2007). Overall, the indignation of the French and Belgium yellow vests can be seen as part and parcel of a broader culture of indignation (see de Sutter 2019; Innerarity 2019), ignited in part by the 2011 movements and the successful pamphlet by Stéphane Hessel in 2011 (“*Indignez-vous!*”). This gives a clear illustration of how broader contexts—both geographical and temporal—shape the opportunities for people to express their indignation and experience its effects.

Despite the commonality of the macroeconomic context between the movements of 2011 and today, there are however a few distinctive features of both the French and Belgium movements that are worth mentioning here. Indeed, in both France and Belgium, the movement was described as remarkable by most of the early commentators (Bendali and Rubert 2020; Jatteau 2019; Ravelli 2020) for its lack of structure yet mass mobilization potential (particularly in France where the movement was also met with strong political repression), for its myriad of identities united under a strong collective symbol (the yellow vest), and for the return of democratic discourses on the back of political claims traditionally taken-up by trade-unions in Belgium (Dufresne Gobin and Zune, 2019). Ideologically, the movement also appeared to blur existing beliefs about people and politics, and assumptions about who might be prone to engage politically, with many yellow vest activists displaying no history of prior political engagement and displaying similar sociodemographic characteristics (members of the working class that were geographically situated outside of metropolitan areas). Lastly, the yellow vest movements were also seen as an embodiment of a new form of ecosocial struggle; in particular for the articulation of narratives at the crossroads between issues of environmental justice and social justice (Chédikain, Guilibert and Lassere 2020; Martin and Islar 2020).

As we show in our findings, these contextual dimensions are important to better situate the affective dynamics of indignation, i.e., the transformative effects of different affective textures of indignation, the reaching of a “boiling point,” the affective resonance with others, and feelings of political empowerment.

Data

We organize our analysis in three steps. First, we situate indignation as a moment of affective transformation in individuals’ affective trajectory by exploring indignation’s affective textures. Second, we explore indignation’s role as a moment of affective resonance which brings individuals to identify with a wider group. Third, we analyze the role of indignation as a transformative moment in individuals’ relations to political authorities and institutions.

To empirically document each one of these affective processes, we go back to Slaby’s (2019) notion of “affective arrangement” and its methodological requirements (as explained by Knudsen and Stage 2015). Looking at indignation from the perspective of an affective arrangement points the researcher’s attention to “an array of persons, things, artifacts, spaces, discourses, behaviors, expressions or other materials that coalesce into a coordinated formation of mutual affecting and being-affected” (Slaby 2019: 109).

This means that, regarding data collection and analysis, we gathered data that revealed indignation's traces in its multiple forms and spaces: in discourses but also in the practices and experiences of BYV participants. We paid attention to explicit moments of indignation, as articulated by participants themselves, but also to the broader affective environment, practices, and trajectories in which these are rooted. In addition, given our understanding of affect as a dynamic concept that encompasses both individual emotional states, and the relations and actions that these emotions elicit, we collected data on the expressions of indignation *per se*, while also paying attention to the actors and material conditions that enabled these affective expressions, and how these re-affected participants in return. This includes, for example, attention to the yellow vest (here meant as the jacket) as material platform of collective representation and sharing of personal indignities. We also looked at Facebook as a social media platform that affords the public expression and sharing of indignation, and the creation of affective communities.

We collected data from spaces where indignation could be observed directly, through participant observations at protest actions and on social media platforms. In addition, we also recreated the conditions under which we could observe the sharing of indignation among participants (in conversation), through the organization of interviews and focus groups.

For the focus groups, we recruited fourteen participants during protest actions. We invited them to join a discussion on January 22, 2019 ($n = 7$, FG1) and on January 24, 2019 ($n = 7$, FG2). The focus group methodology is "a research technique that collects data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher" (Morgan 1996: 130). It offers a venue for participants to share personal stories and collective emotions (Balan 2005; Caillaud, Bonnot, Ratiu and Krauth-Gruber 2016) and invites the researcher to collect basic sociodemographic characteristics of participants. Participants in focus groups were recruited on the spot, during protest actions, as well as during follow-up phone calls and interviews after the protest actions. Their participation in the same action acted as a first recruitment criterion (e.g., in the sharing of a common experience and common attachment to the BYV).

We then composed two groups (FG1 and FG2) based on sociodemographic characteristics, focusing on the question of prior political participation engagement ("Did you participate in a demonstration before this one? Are you a member of a political organization or a trade union?"). These recruitment questions helped us compose two groups—one with newcomers to activism (FG2) and the other with activists engaged in other movements, particularly trade unions (FG1). This created enough homogeneity to allow a sense of safety for participants so they could share personal stories. In particular, the criteria of prior political participation and engagement overlapped with two other sociodemographic characteristics: (1) political preferences and the willingness to identify oneself on the political spectrum (as "rather left," or "neither left nor right");⁴ and (2) professional occupations (either occupying a permanent job position, being unemployed, or in a precarious situation). Together, the groups reflected the different levels of engagement and heterogeneity that cut across the movement, allowing us to capture how indignation acts as "trigger" of participation and mobilization across different sociodemographic situations.

Interestingly, however, these differences, particularly the difference in prior political participation, didn't materialize in significant differences in the focus groups conversations. We observed similar affective discourses across both groups, suggesting a commonality of affective susceptibilities across participants and a common indignation, despite the heterogeneity of their sociological backgrounds and political experiences. Table 1 provides a listing of participants' sociodemographic characteristics.

In terms of the practical organization of the focus groups, both authors took part alternatively in the moderation, supervision, and observations of the focus-group discussions and engaged in mutual feedback sessions at the end of each session. The focus groups took place in a central venue in Brussels akin to a cultural center. It offered the advantage of accessibility by public transport and displayed no formal ties to existing organizations or institutions (neither a university venue, nor an activist venue, nor any other form of institutional ties). The focus groups were filmed, recorded, and transcribed. Each individual participant duly completed and signed a consent form prior to their participation.

Table 1. Sociodemographics of Focus Groups with BYV Participants

<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Education</i>	<i>Professional Situation</i>	<i>Political Orientation</i>
Focus Group 1—Prior Activist Experience^a					
Jeremy	Male	35 - 44	Secondary	Fixed-term contract	Very left
Thomas	Male	55 - 64	Secondary	Permanent contract	Center
Gauthier	Male	35 - 44	University	Fixed-term contract	Very left
Julien	Male	55 - 64	Secondary	Permanent contract	Very left
Ismael	Male	35 - 44	Secondary	Unemployed	Neither left nor right
Frank	Male	55 - 64	Secondary	Retired	Left
Antoine	Male	45 - 54	Secondary	Permanent contract	Very left
Focus Group 2—Newcomers to Activism^b					
Marie	Female	65 - 74	Primary	Retired	Neither left nor right
Serge	Male	55 - 64	Secondary	Invalidity ^c	Left
Isabelle	Female	45 - 54	University	Invalidity ^c	Very left
Julie	Female	35 - 44	Secondary	Permanent contract	Neither left nor right
Pierre	Male	35 - 44	Secondary	Independent	Neither left nor right
Alex	Male	55 - 64	University	Retired	Very left
Cindy	Female	25 - 34	Secondary	Invalidity ^c	Neither left nor right

Note: ^aAverage household income €2,200—min: 1,600; max: 4,500. ^bAverage household income: €2,170—min: 950; max: 3,400. ^cUnemployed due to disability

Together, the two groups brought to life the variety of individual experiences and affective susceptibilities that coalesce around the yellow vest symbol: members of the upper part of the working class, stabilized in employment, and the lower part, marked by precariousness or exclusion from the labour market. These included, amongst others, a retired nurse, a burnt-out teacher, a self-employed graphic designer, a waitress, a single mother, a technician. The conversation among participants was fluid and open. Individuals were eager to share experiences and stories. The focus groups offered a safe space for participants to share their “triggers,” their “boiling points” that motivated them to join the BYV movement, and their stories, allowing us to observe how the process of affective resonance takes place.

This was facilitated by a style of moderation which was unintrusive and unstructured (Powell and Single 1996), and left ample scope for sensitive moments, silence, and improvised conversations to take place. However, the moderation still followed a three-step structure in the form of three broad open questions. First, we asked, participants to recount their first experience as a BYV or the first time they took part in a BYV action. Then we opened a one-hour discussion asking participants to reflect on the most important problems today, asking them to specifically identify a problem that acted as “the last straw that broke the camel’s back” (and triggered their desire to join the BYV). After a break, we continued with a second question relating to the responsibilities tied to these problems, both in terms of actors to blame and in terms of actors of solution.

In addition to the focus groups, our analysis relied on a regular presence in the field. We conducted twelve participant observations between November 2018 and November 2019 which included participation at protest actions, meetings and occupations (e.g., at petrol stations). We also carried out a number of online observations, following the public pages and groups that emerged in the course of the movement, collecting notes and visual material. Facebook groups and pages were selected on the basis of two criteria: the explicitness of their allegiance to the yellow vest movement overall (with explicit titles, such as “les gilets jaunes de Belgique” [the yellow vests of Belgium]), and the publicness of the group or page. Indeed, for ethical concerns, we only included observations derived from public groups and pages. Last, we conducted a series of semistructured in-depth interviews: April 15, 2019, *n* = 4; April 22, 2019, *n* = 2; December 3, 2019, *n* = 1; December 13, 2019, *n* = 2.⁵

Method of Analysis

To analyze indignation in the specific affective arrangements of the BYV movement, we proceeded in several interrelated steps and weaved-in different types of analyses. Indeed, affective arrangements allow the researcher to “combine, not merge, individual perspectives, gleaned from narrative interviews with activists, with fine-grained descriptions of the affective dynamics” (Slaby 2019: 115) at given place, or throughout a cycle of protest; they allow researchers to analyze the affective atmosphere, texture, temporality and other enabling conditions of mobilization (Ayata and Harders 2018).

A core part of our analysis draws on the focus groups conversations specifically. The rest of the corpus, especially the participant observations, served as contextual material to confirm, fine-tune, or nuance some of the findings of the focus groups data analysis.

To analyze the focus-group material specifically, we operationalized indignation as a discursive regime organized around a denunciation, a blame attribution, and the evocation of a collective subject (Kaufmann 2019; Plantin 2012)—all pervaded by multiple affective textures (Knops 2021). We combined two methods of qualitative inquiry: frame analysis (Benford and Snow 2000) and discursive psychology (Edwards 1999; Edwards and Potter 2001) to analyze the main affective discourses of the BYV, the evocation of “boiling points” (or “tipping points”). This combination allowed us to move fluidly from the microlevel of conversation analysis to the macrolevel of power struggles and relations (see Wetherell and Edley 1999).

To conduct the empirical analysis, we developed a comprehensive coding scheme with the aid of the qualitative software NVIVO. The coding scheme was divided in different sections and subsections to seize both the objects of indignant denunciations (through frame analysis), and the affective textures pervading these constructions (through discursive psychology). We proceeded in several coding rounds and data triangulation, by confronting the focus groups data analysis with the rest of our participant observations.

The objects of indignant denunciations and blame were seized through frame analysis, specifically injustice frames (Gamson 1992), by looking at instances where the BYV denounce discriminations, injustices, power imbalances or inequalities. We also looked at adversarial frames, prognostic and agency frames. Indeed, agency frames refer to the consciousness that it is possible to alter conditions or policies through collective action. “They empower people by defining them as potential agents of their own history. They suggest not merely that something can be done but that *we* can do something” (Gamson 1992: 7). These frames are important to understand how BYV participants situate themselves vis-à-vis existing political institutions and how hopeful they are in their own efficacy.

To seize the affective textures of indignation—i.e., not only anger, but also hate, disgust, compassion or love, fear and hope—we borrowed tools from discursive psychology. We identified the “emotion words” and the affective narratives that emerged from the empirical material (Edwards 1999; Edwards and Potter 2001). Importantly, indignation can be observed without the word indignation being named explicitly⁶ (Ravazzolo 2013: 285, in Baider and Cislaru 2013), and several other discursive markers play a role in identifying indignation in conversation, such as high emotional intensity, repetitions, exaggerations, high voice-volume. In addition, the affective textures of indignation were identified based on both explicit mentions (through emotion words, “I am disgusted,” “I am fed-up,” and so on) but also by paying attention to the affective atmospheres at play during the focus groups conversations and protest actions.

In turn, to determine how these affective textures influenced individuals’ agentive capacities, we situated the indignant discourses of participants against their own lived or witnessed experiences of injustice and discrimination (affective susceptibilities), and whether they expressed a feeling of passivity or, on the contrary, a feeling of agency in introducing change. We drew here on the sociodemographic data of participants (see table 1), but most importantly on the way they recounted their own life stories (e.g., Balan 2005). Following Lordon’s definition of indignation as a “boiling point,” we paid particular attention to moments where

individuals described a situation that they no longer tolerated, an accumulation of frustrations leading to a decisive moment, a turn in individuals' affective trajectories—a “tipping point”—that made them want to “act” and “do something.” We then analyzed how participants linked their own life stories to the broader context of collective mobilization and the collective identities articulated by the BYV (affective resonance).

Lastly, given the temporal scope of our period of analysis—from November 2018 to November 2019—we reflected on the possible long-term and transformative effects of indignation: how it may initially motivate individuals to join collective action, and also how this collective experience re-affected them in return (e.g., from enduring participation and further mobilization, to defection and disillusion).

Evidently, and consistent with the concept of affective arrangements, these levels of analysis should not be considered in isolation, but rather in constant interaction with one another. Analysis of individual lived experiences should be combined with collective discourses of indignation observed on protest slogans or Facebook, and the reassembling of text analyses with participant observations. Accordingly, in the presentation of our findings, we weave these analytical levels and empirical materials together.

FINDINGS

Our findings are organized in four sections. We first briefly present the main frames and affective textures that compose the discourses of indignation in the BYV. We then present our findings on the role of indignation as “affective transformation” in three stages: (1) as a tipping point, in individuals' affective trajectories, (2) a moment of affective resonance between individuals and a wider group, and (3) as affective bifurcation in individuals' relation to political institutions, from the disempowered state of fear to the reclaiming of political power.

The BYV Discourses of Indignation

The indignation of the BYV crystallizes around two types of injustice frames. The first one relates to economic matters. The BYV continuously denounce fiscal injustice, economic inequalities, the unfairness of capitalism, the decrease of purchasing power, unemployment, and the perceived diktat of financial institutions. They denounce their disadvantaged position on the losing side of the capitalist economy and as the forgotten ones of society.

The second type of injustice frame relates to politics (political institutions, politicians, political actors), with participants denouncing unfair policies (in particular, taxation), corruption, the remoteness of unworthy politicians obsessed with electoral gains, the dysfunction of electoral politics (e.g., the coalition system at the heart of Belgian politics, the professionalization of politics), and the overall lack of democracy (“Our voice doesn’t count anyway”). These denunciations led the BYV to reject not only the institutions of representative democracy (in particular, political representatives, “politicians,” political parties, and the institution of voting), but also the fundamental logic of representation as a process of power delegation.

Across these frames, we observed a variety of affective textures. The BYV first and foremost self-proclaim to be an embodied form of anger: “The anger of the people.” This was displayed on protest banners, the back of the yellow vests, social media, and the myriad Facebook groups that emerged in the wake of the movement. However, the indignation of the BYV does not revolve around anger only, and our analysis was sensitive to all affective textures that emerged from the empirical material—either to identify the most explicit expressions of indignation or to understand their relations to other affects and emotions. We started with inductive affective categories, e.g., desperation, nostalgia, enthusiasm, or exasperation. We then regrouped them under basic affective states (see table 2) by taking inspiration from Johnson-Laird and Oatley’s dictionary of emotions (1989), organized around five basic emotional states. Then, to analyse how these affective textures influence agentic capacities, we took inspiration from Spinoza’s affect theoretical system (2002) that designates “joy” as a

Table 2. Affective Textures in Focus Group Discussions with BYV Participants

<i>Basic Affects</i>	<i>Related Affective Textures</i>
Anger (109)	Exasperation (45) Miscomprehension (33) Annoyance, Irritation (31)
Sadness (91)	Pity (47) Disillusion (15) Desperation (14) Resignation (5) Nostalgia (4) Unspecified textures (6)
Moral Disgust (82)	Disdain (36) Core disgust (23) Envy (14) Shame (6) Vengefulness (3)
Happiness (100)	Hope (52) Enthusiasm (29) Love, Compassion (19)
Fear (38)	Unspecified ^a
Total coded references: 420	

Note: ^a Based on our empirical material and methodology, we were not able to distinguish between different fear-laden affective textures. Empirical data that denoted fear were therefore coded here in this main category, without subcategories

pole of active affects, and “sadness” as the center of passive affects. We also coded specific affective narratives to capture, for example, the repertoires of revolution that were infused with feelings of empowerment, and stories of struggle and pain that revealed a sense of impotence and passivity.

The dominant affective textures of the coded material lie with sadness, anger, and disgust. However, when looking at the more specific affective textures, hope is the most often coded category. We coded “hope” under “happiness” because it was expressed when participants described the BYV movement with high levels of enthusiasm, joy, and hope for the future. Yet, as explained by Terpe (2016), hope does not always play an empowering function; especially when considered from a temporal perspective and when taking into account the bitterness that emerges from disappointed hopes (Tucker 2018). Indeed, as we will show in the following sections, when situated in context, these affective textures have different effects on individuals’ feelings of agency and empowerment. For example, on the one hand, exasperation may be seen as a rather negative affective texture, denoting a sense of passivity and powerlessness. On the other hand, exasperation can act as a moment of empowerment compared to the long-term, brewing state of resentment.

These affective textures were spread evenly across the corpus. In both focus groups, participants expressed a combination of these in relation to their own situation. These findings were also confirmed by our field observations. There was both sadness and joy at protest actions: a general affective atmosphere of desperation, yet also the enthusiasm and exhilaration characteristic of collective action. There was anger, explicitly displayed on banners and the back of the yellow vests, and there was fear, in particular during confrontations with the police. In our interviews, the BYV denunciations were, by and large, underpinned by a feeling of betrayal, of being left behind and forgotten, and being in a disadvantaged position compared to “those above.” Yet, interviewees also reflected explicitly on how their participation in the BYV acted as a transformative moment, first, by making them more aware of the precarity of others

beyond their own individual experience, and second, by taking action as a first-hand political experience that increases one's sense of agency, i.e., the feeling that radical democratic change is within their reach. For some participants, this first experience of collective action left them with the desire to pursue collective forms of engagement, beyond the BYV only. Participants placed great hopes for change in the movement and its potential to introduce institutional change, whilst also remaining realistic about its actual outcomes (here contrasting for example the more marginal effects of the Belgian movement, compared to its French counterpart).

We Want to Live, Not Survive: Indignation as Tipping Point

The main discourse of indignation articulated by the BYV revolves around a demand for a decent life. "We want to live not survive!"—one of their main slogans—suggests this interpretation. This demand emerged soon after the initial spark that ignited the movement in France (and then in Belgium), the introduction of a fuel-tax. Alongside other decisive moments (such as corruption scandals, austerity measures), this fiscal measure was described by participants as the "last straw that broke the camel's back," the "last drop in a vase that has been overflowing for too long" (FG1). For many, it unearthed buried feelings of oppression and powerlessness and acted as a genuine tipping point, a moment where daily hardships became intolerable and played a decisive role in moving individuals from passive anger to active participation in the BYV movement. It is this passage, the reaching of tipping points, that partly underlies the role of indignation as a trigger for protest and mobilization.

These tipping points were explicitly rooted in individual experiences of precariousness or deprivation, which revealed the variety of affective susceptibilities and thresholds of indignation that co-exist in the movement. When explaining their reasons for joining the BYV, participants evoked a range of lived experiences. Cindy spoke of her situation as a "life not worth living," made of loneliness and sorrow. She referred to her €950 monthly income and her chronic disease for which she no longer receives state support. Marie explained that, even at the age of 67, she had to go back to work at the hospital to make ends meet. Thomas invoked very material and basic needs, such as the rising cost of food, especially meat. Pierre and Julie, however, came from a less economically precarious background and spoke of their desire to afford holidays and "finishing the month properly" (FG2). Overall, despite individual particularities, all expressed concerns for the inability (either their own or of others) to respond to one's basic needs and afford basic amenities. As one protestor stated, "Many have to make a choice between fuel or food, or between fuel and a visit to the doctor" (field observation, 12/22/2018).

Participants told these stories with a mix of pain, sadness and frustrations. These are affects that belong to the distinctive affectivity of resentment (Capelos and Demertzis 2018; Grandjean and Guénard 2012). In particular, resentment is characterized by a brewing and anger that builds over time; a sense of passivity and impotence that comes with "rumination" (Fleury, 2020). An affective combination that was well expressed by Cindy in our conversations, including in the sequence below.

For four years, since the MR [right-wing liberal] has been in power, I've lost everything; I've lost a bit every month—which is not the worst—I've lost all my physiotherapy sessions; I'm not entitled to anything. . . . All the [access to care] rights where I had a minimum of help—I don't have them anymore. I'm getting worse at a rapid rate. So *thank you* Maggie De Block⁷ [bitter, sarcastic tone]. (FG2)

In these life struggles, participants explained how, after "waiting for so long", they reached a tipping point: a moment when they decided to get out of their "shitty lives spent buying and watching things" (protest flyer from field observation 12/08/2018). An explicit illustration of how this is expressed discursively is provided in the excerpt below. Here, Alex expresses his feelings of injustice in relation to the closure of his local cultural center; an event which he situates as a decisive moment in his motivation to take the streets and bring others with him.

I went to the protest on Saturday, but not Wednesday. . . . [Where I live] we have an MR⁸ mayor. . . . I used to often go to the media library to get CDs and DVDs [speaker sounds nostalgic, sad]. And Wednesday, for the first time in a long-time, I went there, I was so proud. All the employees were there and . . . they told me that . . . they have made the decision to close because it wasn't profitable anymore. So this reinforces *my determination* [insists on the word]. The yellow vest movement really, really needs to expand and grow, so that it is *the people* who decide whether we keep a library open or we close it—and NOT for some stupid financial interests, that an entire piece of culture is destroyed! *It's a scandal!* [very angry]. This is why we should all be taking the streets! (FG2)

Discursively, the shift from resentment to indignation was observable through several markers of exasperation. Focus-group participants said they were “Completely fed-up!” They had been “waiting for this movement all their lives.” Also, they had been “eager to rise-up for a while” and that they didn't understand “why we didn't stand up before” (FG1, FG2). Other participants stated, “At one point, I was just fed-up,” and I was “fed-up of watching things.” Others complained that “It is always the same,” “absurd,” and that the underlining specific events were “the last straw that broke the camel's back” (FG2). In turn, by moving individuals from the passive state of resentment to the active participation in a movement, indignation also becomes the starting point of a fundamentally transformative experience, as expressed poignantly by Cindy below.

[Raising her voice] We are already just about surviving, but it's gonna get worse. If you're just born to drag yourself through life, there is no point. That's how I feel right now, so I decided to do something about it and that's why I joined the yellow vests; I feel less passive about my own life, I try to rally people, raise awareness, etc. And I don't intend to let it go (FG2)

For some, joining the BYV was not only empowering, it was described as vital: “If we don't rebel now, I don't know what's the point in living anymore” (FG2). Julie explained how joining the BYV was a true moment of emancipation in the sense of self-discovery and self-affirmation: “Joining the BYV is a confirmation of who I am” (FG2). Similarly, Jeremy used the metaphor of an “oxygen bubble” to describe the movement (FG1), saying that the “movement serves a purpose for *us*.” In recounting their personal experiences, participants also expressed a great sense of hope when invoking a “broader We” and connecting their personal life struggles to that of others; an empowering process which Foessel (2011) describes as a “community of suffering” which paves the way for “acting together.”

We Are All Yellow Vests at Heart: Indignation as Affective Resonance

BYV participants are tied together by experiences of struggle and life-accidents, lived individually but shared collectively and coalescing around the collective identity of “the working poor.” Here, the fuel-tax acted not only as “the last straw that broke the camel's back” for individuals, but also as a moment where individual experiences found a common point of intolerance. It symbolized the general absurdity of a situation where, “We can't even afford to get to work!” and “Even if we work, it is hard to make ends meet!” (FG1, FG2), going beyond the particularity of individual situations. In an attempt to define the boundaries of the BYV movement, one interviewee summarized it as follows: “People who are not convinced [by the movement] are often people who haven't had any life-accidents along the way” (field observation, 06/16/2019). Hence, the affective resonance around the individual indignations are tipping points that created affective communities of pain and suffering, united together by a common experience of struggle.

From here, the affective resonance of the BYV, through the sharing of common pains and struggles, created affective textures of an entirely different kind: joy and compassion. Indeed, as explained by Cindy, the BYV are tied not only by struggle but also by a shared desire to express solidarity and love to others. She stated, “But then, when you see a movement like that—the solidarity, the love between those yellow vests. . . . I found this beautiful and that's what set me into action” (FG2). In this context, participants rooted their indignation in a deep

sense of compassion for the more precarious, those who can't "rise up" anymore, signaling the emergence of a broader "We" in the background that revolves around care and empathy. In the excerpt below, Julie articulates how her own affective susceptibilities and desire to join the BYV movement was motivated by taking into account the precarity and the disadvantaged position of others, all tied under the broader identity of "people" (here understood as "ordinary people").

I joined the yellow vests because, actually, this is something I have always been waiting for... I just have a big heart. I have always helped others ; and I am not from a very poor family. I come from a family of merchants. I don't do it for myself, I do it for all others who can't get up, who can't defend themselves, or not anymore. Because, little by little, everything is being taken away from people (FG2)

The articulation between one's affective susceptibilities (here, Julie's "big heart") and their affective resonance with the collective identities developed by the movement finds its clearest expression in the practice of wearing a yellow vest. Indeed, the yellow vest—as jacket—is the material platform that allows these affective dynamics to come together. The yellow vest is the physical place where participants share their personal grievances (e.g., written on the back, often in the first person) but also signal their recognition for each other's struggles, and feelings of belongingness. Reflecting on the affective power of the yellow vest, Frank, Thomas and Ismael discuss its broad representative function, as the symbol of their common desire to "be seen," and its affective resonance way beyond the BYV; here suggesting that "there is a huge amount of people who are yellow vest at heart."

Ismael: For me the yellow vest is a symbol . . . and actually I think there is a huge amount of people who are yellow vest at heart although they might not be wearing the symbol. So, asking the question of how many yellow vests are there in Belgium? Well, I would say 8 or 9 million, except they don't all wear the symbol.

Thomas: But most of all, it's representative

Frank: Yes, everyone can identify with it

Thomas: I don't really care that there are green, orange . . . the vest is representative of being seen.

Frank: It's a symbol and at the same time it gives people the opportunity to recognize each other, be together, and that's new. . . . (FG2)

Beyond the commonality of lived experiences, and the love and compassion that bind together the BYV community, affective resonance is also at play in the blaming of a common culprit: "the rich and powerful." Indeed, across the empirical material, BYV participants expressed clear and consistent indignation against an enemy figure and an oppressor. This figure took both individualized forms that responded to participants' affective susceptibilities (the landowner, the employer, the tax-evader, the very rich, the one percent, the yacht owner, the multinationals and the "twenty-six richest people in the world" (FG1 and FG2), and a collective extension in the broader category of all "those on top" (which unified attacks to the wealthiest social classes of society and political representatives).

From an affective point of view, when blaming "the rich and powerful," participants often expressed disgust, and disgust—as Cordell reminds us (2017)—is one of the core affective textures of indignation. At times, participants expressed disgust-driven indignation at specific actions carried out by political elites (for example Antoine's statement directly below). Other times, disgust was expressed in a more diffuse way (as with Julie's quote on the next page).

The opportunistic lies of politicians. . . . With the NVA [Nieuw Vlaamse Alliantie, a conservative Flemish nationalist party. Its politicians said.] "We won't touch the VAT on energy, pension, etc." Whatever! It didn't take them 15 days to . . . poooofh! [loud exhale, very annoyed] trigger a social tsunami. That really disgusted me. [He shakes his head, grimaces, and crosses his arms] (FG1)

Julie: What disturbs me is to know that the money spent at war in eight days would be sufficient to stop hunger in the world. . . . I find that disgusting. . . . And loads of other things. . . . The choices they make and they don't even realize what they are doing. . . . (FG2)

In terms of agentic capacities, one may be tempted to think that disgust displays a rather a negative, disempowering effect. However, recent empirical studies have shown that disgust, in the context of mobilization, may on the contrary act as an empowering affect (e.g., Benski, 2005). In the case of the BYV, this is particular true when the disgust expressed by BYV turns into disdain for those situated "above." Disdain places one in the position of judging who is worthy or unworthy of respect (Johnson-Laird and Oatley 1989). It is an affect that discursively reverses the power dynamics between the powerless and the powerful. Indeed, disdainful participants don't feel oppressed or diminished, but rather the contrary. They become a moral authority and look "down" on politicians and judge them as illegitimate and unworthy of "our trust." Through its disdainful expression, indignation aimed at political elites becomes an empowering discourse by allowing BYV participants to reclaim, temporarily, a sense of power in a relationship that is otherwise disempowering. In the sequence below, Ismael and Gauthier reverse the power relations discursively, between them and political representatives. By anticipating, sarcastically, how politicians usually look down on the people, they position themselves as moral authorities, describing what "good" politics should look like (here contrasted against the corrupt, "professional" kind).

Ismael: For me the biggest problem lies with the specialization of politics. . . . [Politicians say,] "It's our job, we have been mastering it for thirty years, so there is no reason why you should get involved."

Gauthier (following Ismael's lead): "Yeah, it's too complex, you can't understand," they tell us.

Ismael: "You're simply too stupid" . . . "Go back to play with your marbles" [they say]. I believe politics should be the exception to this tendency towards specialization. Everyone should be involved and interested because it's for the common good. . . . As soon as you have people in charge who have a personal (financial) interest to stay in power, we have a problem. . . .

Jeremy: In any case, as we know, power corrupts. (FG1)

Elsewhere, participants spoke of politicians' disdain of towards them and reversed the situation by expressing their own disdain towards unworthy, money-obsessed politicians. One participant stated, "I think they simply don't give a shit. As long as you don't touch their salary, they just don't care" (FG2). Another participant said, "There comes a moment where they should stop treating us like idiots!" (FG2). In turn, this disdain is part of what legitimizes the political practices of the BYV, described as "the good" kind of politics and a noble political experience "in the sense of citizens coming together, discussing what they want and sharing a political experience. . . . Away from the professionals who run the show" (FG1). Finally, the BYV's disdain at political elites plays a key role in empowering participants, who believe that "We will do it way better than you!" (field observation 08/12/2018). As we show below, this affective dynamic materialized in the BYV demand to introduce a citizens' initiative referendum (RIC—*référéndum d'initiative citoyenne*), to "bring the power back to the people."

We Take Back Control: Indignation as Bifurcation

Indeed, the tipping points reached individually and shared collectively (through affective resonance), lead BYV participants to demand more political power. A process that, in the words of Cindy in this exchange, is afforded by indignation.

Moderator: What surprised me in the yellow vests was the fast switch from fuel to the demand for citizens' initiative referendum (RIC). I still don't understand how you went from fuel prices to RIC, which are two fundamentally different claims.

Cindy: Indignation. It's indignation.

Moderator: How did you go from "I want more money" to "I want more power?"

Cindy: It's indignation (FG2)

As explained forcefully by Cindy, indignation is a moment of bifurcation in the relations between citizens and political institutions: from resentment and the articulation of shared grievances ("We want to live, not survive"), to the recognition that many more are struggling ("We are all yellow vests at heart"), and ultimately, to the reclaiming of political power (through the RIC). To understand this, it is important to situate indignation in relation to fear and examine how together, indignation and fear act as a kind of raw material for revolt and rebellion (Hardt and Negri 2009: 235).

According to Stolze (2019), it is fear and the accumulation of individual fears that foreground the emergence of indignation in its role as raw material for revolt. In particular, "indignation catalyzes fear and generates a kind of affective contagion" (Stolze 2019:115) which, in turn, triggers a desire for resistance and rebellion. During our inquiry, we observed this affective arrangement in clashes or imminent clashes with the police, in particular when police deployment was deemed disproportionate, and arrests were carried out in abusive ways. Here, the fear that was perceptible among protesters quickly turned into a desire to resist and fight back, "to take back our streets" (field observation, 12/08/2018). Elsewhere, BYV participants expressed fear in relation to specific political actors or events, but also as a diffuse affective background to their indignation. They described their fear of the police during protest actions, fearing, in particular, the brutality of police arrests and dignity-deprivation in moments of detention.¹⁰ They also described their fear of "the system," designed to "brutalize" them and kill any attempts of rebellion. The exchange below illustrates well the entanglement between fear in the face of a system designed to disempower "us" and the desire for rebellion. Julien first discusses it on the macrolevel, and on the microlevel Pierre describes a protest action where he was himself arrested.

Julien: You're talking about conditioning people and why they don't rebel. Let me read you a quote. "To suppress in advance all rebellion, one doesn't need to deploy violent methods. The style of Hitler is old-fashioned. One simply needs to create a powerful domination in people's minds so that the idea of rebellion doesn't even arise. . . . This was Aldous Huxley in 1939. . . . (FG1)

Pierre: [referring to the police at BYV protests] The main order they are given is to scare us, in an effort to diminish the movement. "Scare the people. Be brutal" That's the order. (FG2)

In other contexts, BYV participants also expressed a fear of growing precarity: "The fear of losing the little comfort that we have, the fear of living on the streets" (flyer at protest on 12/08/2018). One interviewee emphasized that "the fear of poverty is more dangerous than poverty itself" (interview, 04/15/2019). In this context, participants expressed feelings of being left behind, denouncing that the "most basic principles of the social contract are not respected" (FG1), which resonates with the broader demands of the yellow vest movement for a more "moral economy" (Hayat 2018a). Here is an underlying sense that, if political elites and institutions can't protect "us" from precarity, we will simply have to do it ourselves.

This situates the role of indignation not just as a culmination of resentment and a "tipping point," but also as a broader affective bifurcation beyond the indignant activist and the affective community: a moment where individual fears give way to the reclaiming of power for "everyone." As summarized well by one flyer, "We can't expect anything from elections, of their summits and reforms. We don't want the crumbs that they leave us!" (protest flyer from 12/08/2018); "We will have to change the rules of the game ourselves" (here referring to the BYV demand to introduce the RIC).

Yellow Beard (activist pseudonym): Everyone has clearly understood that this system is not democracy. . . . You realize that in this game, the people always lose. Rather than trying to play again. . . , we decided for ourselves that we will try to change the rules of the game, because we have understood that there is something in the rules themselves that makes us lose every time. (interview, 12/03/2019)

Discursively, this shift from fear to a demand for radical democratic change was embedded in broader narratives of revolution.

Yellow vests, the anger is growing. Our fight concerns all generations. But for Charles [Michel, PM of Belgium at the time], all seems comfortable. It is time for a revolution! (from a song recorded at a protest action on 01/19/2019)

Antoine: I see the yellow vest movement as an opportunity to hope to bring the system to its knees, and I mean really bringing it down, not only in Belgium, but in the rest of Europe and the world. . . . (FG1)

Indeed, for the BYV, revolution means taking down the institutions of representative democracy, in particular the electoral institution of voting for its implications in terms of power delegation. More specifically, the BYV call to replace or counterbalance electoral institutions by the use of RIC in all matters of concern (from the passing of laws, to constitutional changes, or the revocation of elected officials). In our analysis, we found these revolutionary narratives (Sousa 2019) across the different profiles of BYV participants: from the less educated to the more educated, and from the most precarious to those who with greater wealth. Remarkably, in this context, the collective identity constructed by the BYV revolved around “the Belgian people.” This is a reference that is notoriously absent in the highly fragmented Belgian political system, but which here acts as a strong counterforce to the institutions of representative democracy. Overall, the collectively shared demand for RIC serves here as a good illustration of indignation’s empowering potential, beyond its role as a tipping point or a moment of affective resonance: here it concerns the empowerment of the citizenry at large, as explained by Alex below.

The mother of all problems is power. We need to regain power. In the current situation, one way to do it is the RIC. But I insist, a RIC in all matters of concern, not a tiny little thing. And from there, we should invoke a constituent assembly that would operate a transition towards a national assembly composed of citizens selected by lot and another assembly that would rewrite the constitution. The constitution is our political prison. It was written by people to serve their own interests. . . . (FG2)

However, while the indignation of BYV led to the concrete demand for more political power and participation, it did not reverse the power relations within the existing, dominant political institutions. The political elites treated the movement with smugness and indifference, and the BYV individuals remained in the disadvantaged situations that they denounced. This, in turn, discouraged some participants to remain active in the movement, signaling the possibility that indignation, in the long-run, may also have disempowering effects. If the hopes for revolution are left unresolved, individuals might return to an aggravated state of resentment and bitter disillusion. This was the case for some BYV participants who left the movement, disillusioned by the lack of mobilization and the marginal impact of the movement on Belgian political institutions.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we further the scholarly understanding of indignation, both conceptually and empirically, by unravelling indignation’s role as affective transformation in protest and mobilization. Drawing on the concept of affective arrangement and on data from the Belgian

yellow vest movement, our findings reveal that indignation enables three interrelated affective transformations. Indignation acts (1) as a *tipping point* at the individual level, where a culmination of resentful feelings and exasperation shifts individuals from powerlessness to active participation; (2) at the collective level, indignation involves a process of *affective resonance* where individuals share their grievances with others, target a common culprit, and become part of broader affective communities; (3) at the level of power relations with political institutions, indignation acts as moment of *affective bifurcation* by shifting individuals from a disempowered state of fear to one of reclaiming of political power. Our findings also reveal the circular and cumulative relation that ties these three levels together. Once a tipping point is reached (1) and shared with others (2), indignation's affective resonance may, in turn, trigger further tipping points and more affective resonance. Together, these produce a bifurcation (3) in individual and collective relationships with political institutions, through the articulation of democratic and political claims that go beyond indignant grievances.

When further unpacking each one of these transformative effects, we presented several more specific findings. First, we find that indignation does not only create communities of pain and suffering around the indignant citizen, but also of solidarity, emancipation, and love. Here, we highlight the specific role played by the materiality of the yellow vest—as the physical meeting point of individual affective susceptibilities, affective resonance, and collective identity. Second, we also examined how the collective experience of joining the BYV re-affected participants in return. Here, we find that the mobilization triggered by indignation becomes a transformative life experience; both a confirmation of pre-existing identities and an initiating experience that created the desire to maintain collective forms of engagement even beyond the BYV. Third, we find that indignation, especially its extension to disdain and moral judgment, becomes an empowering discourse for individuals: a moment of reversal in the power relations that tie them to political institutions, where they can look “down” on those situated “above” them. Last, and similar to other social movements, the collective expression of indignation, the blaming of a common culprit, and the collective experience of mobilization create a powerful sense of possibility for radical change (Gerbaudo 2017).

However, our analysis also presents important limitations. By focusing on the BYV only, our findings on indignation as affective transformation cannot be generalized, neither to the entire yellow vest movement nor to other contexts of mobilization. Furthermore, the temporality of our study provides limited findings on the possible disempowering effects of indignation, after the initial cycle of mobilization and the denunciations. Lastly, our choice to focus on indignation may have also obfuscated other important affective dynamics that belong to fundamentally different affectivities. Future research should contextualize these findings against a broader perspective, both in terms of movements considered and affective arrangements.

Finally, future research is also needed to reflect on the normative dimension of our findings. While indignation's role as a tipping point out of resentment may be seen as a largely positive experience for individuals and democratic vitality, its extension into disdain may also lead to forms of moral entitlement and polarization in society. Similarly, while indignation's role as a neutralizer of fear may empower individuals in their role as citizens, it may also lead to disappointed hopes and disillusion.

NOTES

¹ This idea that affects can be either “active” or “passive” goes back to Spinoza's affect theory (Spinoza 2002) which classifies affects as “active” when they bring us closer to “Joy” and increase our “power to act” (or agentive capacities), or “passive” when they bring us closer to “Sadness” and decrease our power to act.

² This understanding is particularly relevant in the case of grassroots, “leaderless” movements, such as the yellow vests (Hayat 2021). However, future studies may want to distinguish between levels or types of indignation that spur individuals to start a protest, or a cycle of mobilization, vs other types of indignation which encourage individuals to join existing forms of mobilization.

³ In his conceptualization of indignation as a dual affective reaction made of hate and love, Stolze draws on Spinoza's definition of indignation as "hatred towards someone who has injured another" (Spinoza 2002).

⁴ In the first group (FG1), which we might call "activists", six out of seven participants answered "yes" to the question "have you taken part in a demonstration before?" and five out of seven considered themselves as far-left or left; only one declined to locate her-himself on a political scale. In the second group (FG2), which we might call "newcomers," three out of seven answered yes to the first question and four out of seven refused to locate themselves on the political spectrum and claimed to be neither left, nor right.

⁵ Participants to these interviews were selected during our protest observations. They were carried out with the aim of having in-depth insights into some of the participants' life trajectories and experiences inside the movement.

⁶ In a similar vein, an important question is whether "indignation" expressed in French, i.e., the native language of BYV participants, is also what is referred to as "indignation" in the scholarly literature (in both English and French). On the one hand, there are differences in the uses of the word across languages and linguistic registers: indignation falls under the familiar and common register in French, while its use remains rarer in common English, which might prefer the word "outrage." On the other hand, despite these differences, both the French *indignation* and the English *indignation* are described in similar ways in the English and French-speaking scholarly literature and point to similar empirical realities: as a "moral" emotion (see e.g., Jasper 2014, 2018; Ambroise-Rendu and Delporte 2008; Cordell 2017), and as a key initiator and motivator of protest (Hardt and Negri 2009; Lordon 2016a). Further research should investigate whether the different linguistic uses and scholarly traditions that have unpacked the word indignation are important at the level of empirical investigation, and in what ways specifically.

⁷ Maggie de Block, from the rightwing liberal party Open-VLD was a former Belgian Health Minister, who undertook a series of reforms in the public health sector.

⁸ *Mouvement Réformateur*, Right-wing, liberal, pro-business, French-speaking political party in Belgium.

⁹ These included specific events such as the decision to extend the legal pension age in Belgium, the introduction of the fuel-tax, financial or corruption scandals (e.g., Panama papers on an international scale, or the Affaire Publifin in Belgium), to more diffuse reasons such as "rising inequalities," "the lies of politicians," or fiscal injustice.

¹⁰ Here referring to the detention of protestors in horse-stables in the aftermath of a protest action in Brussels, 12/08/2018.

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