Deconsolidation or Revitalization of Democracy?
- *An Exploration of The Yellow Jackets’ Movement*

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Suggested supervisor: Lars Tønder

22.701 characters = 9.5 pages

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1 Lars Tønder is professor in political theory at Department of Political Science, University of Copenhagen (UCPH). He is a highly relevant supervisor for my project and he has expressed interest in supervising this PhD-project (see recommendation letter). In addition, I plan to use Jean-Claude Monod or Marc Crépon as an informal supervisor. Both are professors at École Nationale Supérieure, Paris where I wish to conduct some of my research (see preliminary time schedule).
1. Introduction

The primary motivation for this research project is the recent rise of The Yellow Jackets movement in France. It is relevant to study this social movement with the overall aim of understanding the challenges it poses for contemporary Western-European liberal democracies as well as for democratic theory more generally. Thus, the purpose of the research project is a critical intervention into contemporary democratic theory. An intervention that emphasises ethnographic fieldwork as a means of exploring politics through The Yellow Jackets’ lived experiences and bodily performances. Drawing on existing research strengths in political theory at the Department of Political Science, UCPH, this project aims at providing a bridge between contemporary politics and normative political theory. The PhD project seeks to answer the following question:

How does The Yellow Jackets movement in France challenge contemporary liberal democracies, and what methodological, normative, and political insights can democratic theory learn from a social movement like this one?

In order to approach this overarching question, the project is divided into two parts:

1. Problem: The Yellow Jackets as a political phenomenon.
   1.1 Who are The Yellow Jackets?
   1.2 What implications follow from this political phenomenon?

2. Theory: Radical democratic theory provides resources for a new theorization of this type of social movement.
   2.1 What are the shortcomings of existing democratic theory?
   2.2 How can ethnography inform radical democratic theory?

Table 1 below shows the preliminary structure of the dissertation.
Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Pages</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>Chapter 1: Introduction</td>
<td>15 p</td>
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<tr>
<td>Part one:</td>
<td>Chapter 2: Who are The Yellow Jackets?</td>
<td>50 p</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 The Rise of The Yellow Jackets movement</td>
<td>Chapter 3: Introduction to the ethnographic study</td>
<td></td>
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<td>movement (15p)</td>
<td>Chapter 4: The democratic paradox: Radical and deliberative approaches</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 Democratic challenges (35p)</td>
<td>Chapter 5: The contestations of the concept of popular sovereignty</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Part two:</td>
<td>Chapter 6: Shortcomings of existing democratic theory</td>
<td>140 p</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 Challenges for Democratic Theory (25p)</td>
<td>Chapter 7: Need for an ethnographic turn in radical democratic theory.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 Ethnographic Fieldwork (115p)</td>
<td>Chapter 8: Theoretical introduction to fieldwork</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Chapter 9: Butler: Observation studies and intimate talks</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Chapter 10: Laclau and Mouffe: Qualitative interviews</td>
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<td>Chapter 11: Rancière: Aesthetical studies</td>
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<td>Conclusion</td>
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<td>15 p</td>
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The dissertation will be approximately: 220 p

1.1 Background

From a democratic point of view, a worrying tendency has begun to characterise contemporary Europe. People no longer value democracy as much as they have done in the past. This is especially true for the European youth: 13 percent of them believe that a democratic political system is a bad or a very bad system (Foa and Mounk 2016, 2017). Thus, for many it is no longer essential to live in a democracy. In a French context, anxiety concerning the “social contract” is also present. According to a study from 2017, a majority of the French people thinks that the contract is no longer working (More in Common 2017). Moreover, voter turnout was the lowest since 1965 at the presidential election in 2017 (IDEA, 2019).

Alongside these trends, a new social movement emerged in France in the late fall of 2018: “Les Gilets Jaunes” (The Yellow Jackets). Starting out as a reaction against the French president Emmanuel Macron’s proposal to introduce a gasoline tax, the movement has now developed into a general demand for popular power, stressing the cleavages between city and countryside as well as between elite politicians and ordinary people. As two of The Yellow Jackets noticed about the movement in a recent Facebook post: “The Yellow Jackets is a people in opposition who wants to institute its own power”.

3
From a theoretical perspective, the emergence of The Yellow Jackets has also drawn attention. The French philosopher Jacques Rancière views the movement as an unconventional expression of “an alternative people” that is neither encapsulated by the electoral system nor easily placed within a common ideology (Rancière 2019a, 2019b). Another French philosopher, Jean-Claude Monod, sees the rise of the Yellow Jackets in relation to a governmentality crisis provoked by the prominence of neoliberal politics in Western Europe (Foucault 2010; Monod 2019, 1997, 2007, 2012). According to Monod, The Yellow Jackets are interesting for social sciences to study as their demands for popular power and social justice are issues that we ought to take into consideration. In other words: They witness of insufficiencies within contemporary liberal democracy. From Monod’s perspective there is a potential in The Yellow Jackets as they open up ideas for new forms of democracy with an emphasis on popular power (Monod, 2019).

1.2 State of the art
Following these observations, I draw on the theoretical concept of popular sovereignty in order to study The Yellow Jackets and their demand for being recognised as political subjects. Since my normative aim is to investigate opportunities for rethinking popular sovereignty, my starting point are theories that emphasize this concept in their accounts of democratic politics\(^2\). As I wish to show in more detail in my dissertation, a good way to structure this inquiry is to focus on “the democratic paradox” in contemporary political theory (Lefort 1988; Ricoeur 1956).

Shorty summarized, the democratic paradox arises due to an inherent indeterminacy in democracy itself. Thus, political theorists like Claude Lefort argue that whereas the place of power in a monarchical regime is easily identified with the King, it remains non-identified in a democracy (Lefort 1988). Two things follow from this, according to Lefort. On the one hand, it gives the people an unprecedented freedom to regulate and constitute itself in a way that always is subject to contestation and revision. On the other hand, it also follows that every time the people, as people, seeks to constitute itself, it does so in a way that closes off the openness that made the constitution possible in the first place. So, even though democracy means rule by the people, the people itself cannot occupy the space of power without contradicting its own conditions of possibility.

\(^2\) This means that advocates of a minimalist liberal democracy such as Hans Kelsen or John Rawls are not included (Kelsen, Urbinati, and Accetti 2013; Rawls 1987, 2003).
Lefort identifies this contradiction to be inherent to democracy and suggests that we conceptualise democratic struggles in light of its challenge to conventional models of popular sovereignty (ibid.). Accordingly, it is now possible to identify at least two schools of thought within contemporary critical democratic theory, each trying to negotiate the concerns and anxieties associated with the paradox.

On the one hand, deliberative democrats suggest a solution to the democratic paradox. One of the most prominent advocates of deliberative democracy, Jürgen Habermas, presents his solution through the thesis of the co-originality of public and private autonomy in a two-track model (Habermas 2001; Habermas and Andersen 2005; Habermas and Rehg 2001; Habermas and Shapiro 1971). The aim is to show that people can be both authors of and addressees to the laws. This implies that the paradox can be solved given the right circumstances for people to engage with politics in the civil sphere (Habermas and Rehg 2001). Thus, Habermas views popular sovereignty as an essential part of democracy. However, a formal track is equally essential for enabling a rationalised deliberative democracy. The concept of popular sovereignty becomes then procedural as it is to be enacted through law. Thereby anti-democratic dangers such as populistic reign of popular sovereignty are prevented (ibid.). Hence, a rich civil society together with rational procedures can “solve” the paradox.

On the other hand, we find a host of radical democratic theorists who do not think that the paradox is solvable in any way. According to these theorists, the paradox should instead be negotiated, if not embraced. The reason for this is that the indeterminacy of democracy makes it impossible to secure and implement the co-originality of public and private laws in real world politics. What we instead can do is to go deeper into the paradox in order to pursue a strategy of real-world pluralization that not only expands the power of the people but also strives for an open-ended and perpetual “politics of becoming” (Connolly 1999; Campbell and Schoolman 2008; Connolly 2017; Mouffe 2018a). Because there is no rational procedure constraining popular sovereignty, manifestations of popular wills are perpetually contestable, and thereby open to a radical potential and an open-ended approach to democracy. Accordingly, the paradox of democracy reveals a revolutionary dimension open to new modes of contestation of the popular will (Laclau, 2007).

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An important goal of this research project is to explore the strengths of this second strand of contemporary radical democratic theory and to link it to social movements like The Yellow Jackets. By immersing myself into the democratic paradox, welcoming the indeterminacy, I hope to show how suspense and contestation can be the very form of democracy and popular sovereignty. The central question of the present project is therefore how to make the “people” further embody the empty space of democratic power. In order to enlighten this question, we need to study the material conditions of political practice more closely.

2. Research design
2019 is a symbolic year to begin a research project on how to conceptualize and negotiate popular sovereignty with a special focus on The Yellow Jackets. 300 years ago, the Jacobins demanded popular sovereignty during The French Revolution; and only 30 years ago, the fall of the Berlin Wall made liberal democracy the democratic regime in Europe (Fukuyama 1992). Today, The Yellow Jackets, like the Jacobins, demand popular sovereignty by challenging the assumptions of liberal democracy. An urgent question is thus whether, and if so, how The Yellow Jackets have a potential of revitalising democracy. This question is the point of departure for this research project.

2.1 Methodology
Following the lines of inquiry outlined in the above, I draw on Michael Freedens’ hermeneutic approach to political theory. This is an approach that emphasises politics as social practices (Freeden 2013). By this, Freeden means to define politics in a broad way. This implies that the political is manifests in thoughts and feelings of ordinary people rather than in abstract visions of politicians and political philosophers. In my previous study of contemporary French politics, I analysed Macron’s political vision and its ideological components (Dichman, 2018). I now wish to add to this top-down perspective a new perspective through a bottom-up approach. This means that rather than analysing political speeches, books, and formal policies, I turn to less studied dimensions of politics such as lived experiences, aesthetic expressions, and bodily performances. According to such an approach, it is scientifically valuable to explore particular social practices in the search for understanding the general challenges to contemporary liberal democracies.

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5 My focus is on Freedens’s latter approach focused on “thinking politically” rather than his more well-known ideology analysis organised around three types of concepts: core, adjacent, and periphery (Freeden 1996; 2013).
Freeden calls for an attention to and recognition of actual thought-practices. According to him, “the palette of political thinking has too few colours” (Freeden 2015). Continuing Freeden’s metaphor, I wish to add yet another colour to the palette by studying The Yellow Jackets ethnographically. I believe this will fill an existing gap in democratic theory. I wish to engage with The Yellow Jackets in a number of ways: interview followers of the movement, trace its history and different afterlives, and take part in the public manifestations (if these are still happening). As research has shown, former protesters from the Greek “Aganaktismenoi” have engaged in alternative work and organisations after they left the square (Kioupkiolis and Karyotis 2016; Varvarousis and Kallis 2017). Inspired by this research, my aim is to explore new forms of political activities and communities. According to Monod, The Yellow Jackets can provide such insights.6

Moreover, I wish to study the social movement by exploring other types of media such as art and movies. I believe such media can reveal new insights so far insufficiently explored. In all of these interventions, my focus is not strictly on ideas but includes other ways of studying the movement. My aim is thus to listen, observe, and participate in order to better understand politics of desires, affects, and “ressentiment”. In other words, the project aims at being an “enlightenment project” that explores new and/or forgotten perspectives and perceptions (Foucault and Rabinow 1991; Freeden 2015; Foucault 2010, 2011, 1995).7

2.2 Theory

In contemporary political theory, there is currently a debate concerning the term “realism”. Freeden takes a particular position different from the one of Enzo Rossi and Matt Sleat (Rossi and Sleat 2014). Both stances agree that political realist theoreticians should begin with the practices of politics itself rather than the explication of moral ideals8 (Freeden 2012; Rossi and Sleat 2014; Leopold and Stears 2008). However, Freeden advocates an interpretative realism that emphasizes ethnographic studies (Freeden 2012). He distinguishes this version of realism from a prescriptive realism that focuses on recommendations and justifications. The prescriptive theorists are blind to much of what takes place in the real world due to a narrow focus on desirable ends. Rather, Freeden wants the social scientist to be an elucidator exploring the political instead of judging it.
In such an investigation the construction of social visions can be further unfold (ibid.). By means of an ethnographic study, I wish to explore and unfold the political subjects of The Yellow Jackets.

Michael Freeden’s approach to political theory does not only provide a perspective from which the Yellow Jackets can be studied ethnographically. It also allows an accommodation of my threefold theoretical starting point consisting of Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, and Jacques Rancière. The three different theoreticians provide different proposals on what “data” to look for. Rather than studying The Yellow Jackets deductively from abstract principles and testing the movement according to theoretical hypotheses, these three theoreticians open for an explorative study focusing on affects, bodies, and alternative voices. Common to the theoreticians is an aim of moving beyond abstract theory and engage in actual politics. Yet, they differ in terms of what empirical utterances to look for. I shortly outline the three different aspects of studying the political.

In her most recent work, Judith Butler emphasises bodily assemblies as performances of popular sovereignty (Butler 2018). In contrary to the deliberative perspective, Butler advocates for a need for performative popular sovereignty detached from the representative regime and the norms of individuality (ibid.) She proposes a social ontology that recognises individual precarity and thus a universally shared vulnerability (Butler 2016, 2018). With this follows an ethical responsibility to loosen the anxiety; an anxiety which is manifest in The Yellow Jackets. From Butler’s perspective, The Yellow Jackets can be regarded as assemblages performatively citing earlier protests movements such as the Jacobins and the 1968 youth protest movement in Paris - all with the common aim of being recognized. A citation contesting the existing regime that might lead to a new one. Thus, Butler provides a potential for understanding the social movement with a bodily emphasis on the assemblage. This makes it interesting to study the Yellow Jackets closely rather than from distance.

The second perspective is the one of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, which emphasises the concept of populism and how populism is the royal road to understanding the ontological constitution of the political (Laclau 2007). In this approach, it becomes relevant to study the Yellow Jackets from a discourse analytical angle in line with Freeden’s earlier authorship (Freeden 1996). From such a perspective, the social movement can be regarded as an empty signifier articulating an equivalential chain of unsatisfied popular demands (Laclau 2007). By means of discourse analysis of written sources, the demands of the Yellow Jackets can be identified. An identification revealing democratic opportunities of populism (Mouffe 2018a). This means that qualitative interviews can provide data
in this perspective. Thereby, one might identify a re-politicization of a consensus of the centre and a radicalization of the principles of a liberal democratic regime, “liberty and equality for all” (ibid.).

A third perspective within radical democratic theory is the one of Jacques Rancière. According to him, The Yellow Jackets deviate from the normal order of things: They manifest a rupture of properness and displace the borders of the political (Rancière 2016). They express the political by creating a space that does not have a formalised voice. Put differently, they are the “demos” as the surplus community: Those with no qualification to rule (ibid.). So, the disorder of The Yellow Jackets reveals something about the dominant order of liberal democracy (ibid.). Moreover, Rancière emphasises the simultaneity of politics and aesthetic experiences which implies alternative “data” (Panagia 2009, 2018). From this perspective, one should study politics beneath and beyond the discursive register of communicative sense making. In other words, visual perceptions in art, movies, and in public space are relevant to study. In short, aspects of the political and democratic life that do not belong to existing categories.

Whereas Butler’s theory advocates observation studies and/or intimate talks with protesters, Laclau and Mouffe suggest written sources and discourse analysis. Lastly, Rancière invites us to use our politological imagination and study the moments of rupture. Table 2 below summarises my theoretical starting point consisting of the three different radical democratic thinkers each proposing a distinct interpretation of The Yellow Jackets, a “diagnosis” of liberal democracy and a normatively attractive response emphasising popular sovereignty.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>The Yellow Jackets</th>
<th>Diagnosis of Liberal Democracy</th>
<th>Normatively attractive Response</th>
<th>Unit of Analysis</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Laclau and Mouffe</strong></td>
<td>A populist moment: Hegemonic operation becomes possible.</td>
<td>“Post-democratic” situation signifying only the presence of free elections and human rights.</td>
<td>Left Populism as an affective strategy. Restoration of the agonistic character of democracy.</td>
<td>Discourse analysis: Qualitative interviews.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3. Contributions

3.1 Methodological, normative, and political insights

In this section, I account for the threefold contributions my research project can provide; a methodological contribution, a normative contribution, and a political contribution\(^9\).

First, the case of The Yellow Jackets provides a methodological contribution within the field of democratic theory by providing an ethnographic turn (Freeden 2015). Within the last decade, we have seen various new social movements protesting against the lack of recognition and responsiveness in liberal democracies. In a European context, the Occupy Movement, the Greek “Aganaktismenoi”, and the Spanish “Indignados” arose in 2011 and have been subject for research in political theory (Prentoulis and Thomassen 2013; Valdivielso 2017)\(^{10}\). Yet, an ethnographic approach is still insufficiently explored.

Secondly, The Yellow Jackets exemplify the overall theoretical clash between deliberative critical theory and radical critical theory as emphasised in section 1.2. The French case is highly relevant because it can be viewed as an empirical example providing normative insights in terms of how to react to “the democratic paradox”. In other words, the research project aims at studying The Yellow Jackets as negotiating and expanding the concept of popular sovereignty.

Thirdly, The Yellow Jackets have become influential in different political contexts. Thus, this study serves political insights in general terms. Not only have the protesters been Macron’s priority through several months. They have also caused diplomatic troubles between Italy and France, and The Yellow

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9 See research question, section 1.

10 Thomassen’s studies of social movements have been a great source of inspiration for this research project (Prentoulis and Thomassen 2013), and his scholarly visit at the Department of Political Science is very relevant for this project.
Jackets are moreover causing troubles in terms of the upcoming European Parliament election in the end of May. Hardcore brexiter’s are now wearing yellow jackets in Great Britain, and in Germany the left-wing “Aufstehen” derives from the French social movement. In line with this, The Yellow Jackets can be interpreted as a symptom of a greater divide and they politicize themes that all Western-European democracies ought to take into consideration such as top-down carbon tax, city-countryside asymmetries and lack of recognition.

4. Estimated budget

Table 3 below summarizes my expected expenditure related to the research project. In case my expenditure cannot be covered, I have experience with applying for funding through my past exchange at Sciences Po. My plan is thus to fund my year in France through broad research grants such as Oticon Fonden, Knud Højgaard and Augustinusfonden. Moreover, there exists a ranch of grants particularly pointed to studies in France (“Institut Français” 2019).

Table 3

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5. Bibliography


Yale Agrarian Studies Series. New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press.