

## THE STRENGTH OF PUSHBACK COLLECTIVE IDENTITY IN FRAGMENTED MASS MOVEMENT\*

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*Abstract: This paper examines how social movement actors can forge and sustain a collective identity despite heterogeneous backgrounds and the absence of pre-existing commonalities and networks. Based on an ethnography of the French yellow vest movement, we build on the concept of reactive identity to describe two key mechanisms. First, we show this movement's collective identity crystallized through the actors' shared reactions to the broader socio-political environment. Then, we describe how identification processes are reinforced when social movement actors feel rejected, stigmatized, and repressed in their interactions with national institutions, civil society, and individuals. We explain how these mechanisms are useful for understanding the development of collective identities within mass movements, which encompass individuals with various and fragmented identities. Exploring new dimensions of reaction beyond the us-versus-them mechanisms of identity formation, we show how collective identity can coalesce for groups who became stigmatized as they mobilize to oppose their environment.*

We—the yellow vests from the roundabouts, from the parking lots, from the squares, the assemblies, the protests—are reunited these 26th and 27th of January as an “Assembly of Assemblies,” bringing together hundreds of delegations [...] Since November seventeen, from the smallest village, from the rural world to the largest city, we have been standing up against this deeply violent, unfair and unbearable society. We will not remain passive anymore! We are fighting against the rising cost of living, against precarity, and against misery [...]. With our yellow vests, we are taking back the floor, a floor which we never used to have. (Call from the first Assembly of Assemblies of the Yellow Vest movement, January 27, 2019)

This call from the yellow vest movement speaks to a crucial tension at the heart of current social movement research (Fiorito 2019; Gawerc 2016): how does a movement's collective identity crystallize despite being an initially heterogeneous group with few pre-existing commonalities and an absence of previous collective experiences and shared networks? In a matter of weeks, the yellow vest became a collective identity embraced by hundreds of thousands of individuals, suggested by the collective “we.” However, this call also hints at some deep-rooted fragmentations in the movement: people who identified as “yellow vests” came from cities and rural areas, were dispersed around the country in local groups and mobilized through different types of spaces—from large-scale marches in the middle of Paris to small weekly gatherings in

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country-side roundabouts. This movement created a new label for itself: the “yellow vest,” which did not exist as an identity before September of 2018 but consolidated as a substantive noun to describe the members of the movement—“*being a yellow vest*”—and as an adjective to describe their action—“*doing something yellow vest*”—by the end of that same year.

Through an ethnographic analysis of the abrupt and yet enduring formation of this new collective identity of “yellow vests” in an arguably diverse movement, we explore a compelling puzzle for social movement theory: how do collective identities emerge in heterogeneous mass movements whose actors are characterized by the absence of a pre-existing common identity? Collective identity, the way in which “social actors recognize themselves—and are recognized by other actors—as part of broader groupings, and develop emotional attachments to them” (Della Porta 1999, 91; Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta 2001; Melucci 1985; 1996), raises questions when not based on commonalities or previous collectively experienced stigmatization and oppression (Polletta and Jasper 2001). Social movement theory has explored how collective identities can emerge from shared demographic traits and identities (Armstrong 2002; Bernstein 1997; 2005; Polletta and Jasper 2001), similar structural location (Taylor and Whittier 1992), common social status (Calhoun 1995; Lichterman 1995; Piven and Cloward 1977; Fominaya 2010), common activist repertoires and politics (Lichterman 1995; Mische 1995; Pulido 1996), and pre-existing infrastructures or networks (Gould 1995; Morris 1981; Dixon and Roscigno 2003; Polletta and Jasper 2001, 291). However, these elements often do not pre-exist in mass movements able to produce *ad hoc* collective identity, as with the yellow vest movement.

In the case of the yellow vests, the movement’s collective identity did not emerge from pre-existing or commonly ascribed identity features or political commonalities or by pre-existing networks or infrastructures, although social media favors creating infrastructures to connect people beyond spatial location (Lopes 2014). First, the yellow vest movement cut across socioeconomic lines, though mostly working and middle class, uniting people with a wide range of incomes and professions (Bendali and Rubert 2021a; Collectif d’enquête sur les Gilets Jaunes et al. 2019). Second, the movement did not coalesce around a single political affiliation, ideology, or political leaning (Boyer, Delemotte, Gauthier, Rollet, and Schmutz. 2020; Cointet, Morales, Cardon, Froio, Mogoutov, Ooghe, and Plique 2021): members described themselves as “*apolitical*”<sup>1</sup> or on a range “*from the far right to the far left*,” emphasizing that they were not partisans of any political party. Our ethnographic data suggest that the yellow vests are divided on many ideological questions, including whether the movement is against or in favor of capitalism and how they should position themselves regarding French far-right and far-left parties and movements. Third, the movement is also heterogeneous in terms of past activist experiences (from absolute neophyte to experienced union members) (Collectif d’enquête sur les Gilets Jaunes et al. 2019) and divided with regards to tactics (e.g., using violence, having leaders). Aware that the empirical content of the identity of yellow vest members varied across time and between members, we sought to understand the mechanisms that explained how this collective identity emerged and was sustained over time.

The question of how a movement’s collective identity crystallizes without these preconditions is crucial at a time when mass movements often forge new collective identities. In such movements, collective identities can emerge within groups of heterogeneous people who do not share pre-existing commonalities, favoring the development of a politicized collective identity, as is the case with the Occupy movement, the Anonymous movement, the Indignados, and the Sardine movement in Italy (Perugorria, Shalev, and Tejerina 2016; Bordignon and Ceccarini 2015; Kavada 2015; Massa 2017; L. Smith, Gavin, and Sharp 2015). In the specific case of the yellow vest movement, our data analysis has shown that a sense of collective identity emerged and was sustained when actors reacted collectively to their overall social, economic, and political environment and then experienced backlash in multiple social spheres.

Building on these first observations and drawing on preliminary theorization of reaction in social movements, particularly on the concept of *reactive identity formation* coined in the field of ethnic and migration studies (Nagra 2011; Portes and Rumbaut 2001), we propose a

complementary theory of movement identity formation relying on different mechanisms of reactive identity to crystallize collective identities in large heteroclite movements. First, we show how reactive identity enables diverse people to develop a new collective identity through reacting to their environment (grievances, criticisms, collective frames) without depending on a pre-existing under-politicized common identity shared by the actors. This reactive collective identity can remain sufficiently loose and malleable, making possible the convergence of a heterogeneous group of people who do not need shared initial characteristics, locations, or infrastructures. Second, we describe how identification can be reinforced through negative feedback and pushback, explaining how the backlash against groups like the yellow vests helps galvanize movements. This backlash does not need to correspond to an *a priori* stigmatization but can emerge as movements start to react to their environment, making reactive identity a dynamic process reinforced by the joint mechanisms of reacting against and facing backlash from one’s environment. Reactive identity plays out in different social spheres, helping a movement identity coalesce and sustain despite differences in the socioeconomic profiles, political leanings, and strategic repertoires within a group, and despite or even thanks to the pushback received by these groups. Overall, these mechanisms can prove helpful in analyzing different fragmented mass movements that have developed since the mid-2000s, such as the anti-austerity or anti-elite movements.

### **UNDERSTANDING COLLECTIVE IDENTITY WITHOUT COMMON CHARACTERISTICS: COMPLEMENTING EXISTING THEORIES**

Social movement studies have described collective identity as essential for collective action (Della Porta 1999, 100; Valocchi 2009) and “necessary for mobilization of any social movement” (Bernstein 1997, 536). Collective identity provides a “shared definition of a group” (Taylor and Whittier 1999, 170), builds the perception of a shared status or relation, which may be imagined rather than experienced directly (Polletta and Jasper 2001, 285), facilitates the formation of “political consciousness” (Bernstein 1997, 536) and enables the mobilization of constituencies (Taylor and Whittier 1992).

Scholars have analyzed the processes of collective identity formation (Polletta and Jasper 2001, 284), stating that collective identities “do not exist de facto by virtue of individuals sharing a common structural location [but] are created in the course of social movement activity” (Taylor and Whittier 1999, 174). They have stressed the role of group boundaries, which include and exclude members, and the function of politicizing everyday life in sustaining collective identity (Taylor and Whittier 1999). Yet most research unpacking the construction of collective identity has focused on movements sharing commonalities beforehand, shedding light on “oppositional identities based on class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and other persistent social cleavages” (Taylor and Whittier 1999, 187). These theories assume that collective identities emerge from pre-existing but initially under-politicized shared identity traits or structurally dominated positions (Polletta and Jasper 2001; Bernstein 2005; Mansbridge and Morris 2001; Moon 2012), sharing the same regional or national identity (Klandermans and Mayer 2013; Klandermans, Linden, and Mayer 2005), or experiencing common forms of oppression (Calhoun 1995; Fantasia 1988; Piven and Cloward 1977; Moon 2012). Yet these variables do not seem to be as central in some more recent mass movements, such as the yellow vest movement, as we demonstrate in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Comparing Theories on Collective Identity Formation and Empirical Evidence about the Yellow Vest Movement

Literature assumption about the origin of collective identity	Unlikely in the case of the yellow vest
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	Pre-existing shared (minority) demographic characteristics (Armstrong 2002; Bernstein 1997; 2005; Polletta and Jasper 2001)	Diverse demographics: women subgroup in the yellow vest movement since January 2019, different age groups (Bedock et al. 2018), no emphasis on sexual, racial, or religious minorities, etc.
	Common social status (Calhoun 1995; Dixon and Roscigno 2003; Lichterman 1995; Piven and Cloward 1977)	Variation across socioeconomic status: lower-middle class, middle-class (Confavreux 2019; Delpirou 2019), although several reported feeling erased (Bantigny 2019)
Group commonalities as the basis for collective identity	Role of common organizing culture and activist repertoire (Lichterman 1995; Pulido 1996; Smithey 2009; Jasper 1997; Taylor and Dyke 2004; Van Dyke, Soule, and Taylor 2005)	Movement shared between “primo-manifestants”—first-time protesters—and experienced labor union organizers (Noiriel 2019; Rosanvallón 2019; Bedock et al. 2018)
	Role of shared political affiliation (Mische 1995)	Described as either “apolitical” or “ranging from the far right to the far left” in the newspapers, corroborated by our observations and interviews. Surveys on the movement also show variations in political affiliation and voting practices (Boyer et al. 2020): 33% nonpartisan, 15% far left, 5.4% far right, 42.6% left, 12.7% right on an early survey from December 2018 (Bedock et al. 2018).
	Pre-existing infrastructures or networks (Gould 1998; Morris 1981; Dixon and Roscigno 2003)	People coming from rural, urban, and peri-urban areas (Delpirou 2019). Thousands of groupuscule actions on the territory (Noiriel 2019): organizing at roundabout, tolls, town hall, small city centers, marches in Paris, local assemblies, or ADA.
Role of pre-existing infrastructures to foster collective identities	Sharing “prior bonds with others that makes solidaristic behaviors a reasonable expectation” (Polletta and Jasper 2001, 289; citing Fireman and Gamson 1979)	National movement that developed in rural communities, as well as urban and peri-urban ones, across professions (Confavreux 2019; Bedock et al. 2018), and where only a few people knew each other before the movement [fieldwork]. Meetings through social media pages.
	Role of urban location (Gould 1995) or free spaces (Futrell and Simi 2004; Polletta 1999)	Important factions of the movement coming from dispersed rural or peri-urban areas (Delpirou 2019). No pre-existing spaces to the movement.
	Pre-existing movement organization to generate network ties (Polletta and Jasper 2001, 291).	No pre-existing movement organizations. The premises of the movement were a petition, videos, and social media groups

	the role of “intellectual and group leaders” to manufacture claims (Clifford and Nepstad 2007; Nepstad and Bob 2006; Polletta and Jasper 2001, 299)	Role of leaders contested in the yellow vest movement. Leaders were never officially recognized or legitimated as representatives of the movement. They were described as “self-proclaimed,” and some of them endured rejection. [fieldnotes]
Strategies to foster collective identities	Use of external moral shock (Jasper 1997; Jasper and Poulsen 1993); collective frames or through collective memory developed within movement (Polletta and Jasper 2001; Snow and Benford 1988)	The role of collective frames and moral shock was obvious in this movement, although interestingly dispersed across many different claims and grievances (Marchand et al. 2019). The movement tapped into many different national collective imaginaries—from Poujadism (reactionary conservatism) to French revolutionary imageries and 1968 (Confavreux 2019)—and thus did not have one source of collective memory.
	Role of social media in shaping mobilizations (Mundt, Ross, and Burnett 2018; Khamis and Vaughn 2012; Tufekci and Wilson 2012) and fostering meaning-making among activists (Kavada 2015; Penney and Dadas 2014).	Social media is instrumental in shaping collective actions and development of claims in the yellow vest movements (Noiriel 2019; Sebbah et al. 2018; Marchand et al. 2019), but what about identity formation?

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To explain the formation of a movement’s new collective identity without preexisting common identity features (Polletta and Jasper 2001, 290–91), scholars have explored other factors, including sharing political leaning, organizing style, or common repertoires of action (Lichterman 1995; Jasper 1997; Smithey 2009; Heaney and Rojas 2011). This research shows that movements can be fostered by institutional infrastructures that “put members of other groups into regular day-to-day contact” (Polletta and Jasper 2001, 290–91) or common structural positions (Polletta and Jasper 2001, 288), which can be related to patronage (Gould 1998), “pre-existing institutions and organizational forms” (Morris 1981, 744), urban location (Gould 1995), political affiliation (Mische 1995), submerged networks (Melucci 1985, 809–10), and local networks that “transform their members into political actors” (Taylor and Whittier 1992, 104; citing Friedman and McAdam 1992). Other theories have also emphasized the agentic role of “intellectual and group leaders” in fostering new collective identities (Clifford and Nepstad 2007; Nepstad and Bob 2006; Polletta and Jasper 2001, 299) and manufacturing the claims of a movement through external moral shocks (Jasper 1997; Jasper and Poulsen 1993), collective frames (Snow and Benford 1988), and collective memory developed within movements (Polletta and Jasper 2001, 299).

In line with this body of work, recent theories have, particularly, emphasized the role of social media in shaping current mobilizations (Khamis and Vaughn 2012; Tufekci and Wilson 2012). They have highlighted that new technologies of information and communication constitute a valuable resource to foster meaning-making among activists (Kavada 2015; Penney and Dadas 2014; Castells 2015; Garrett 2006) by “making it easier for groups to adopt or appropriate symbols even if they do not share the collective identity” (Mundt, Ross, and Burnett 2018, 11), and favoring convergence among people who share experiences of stigmatization

(Mundt, Ross, and Burnett 2018; De Choudhury, Jhaver, Sugar, and Weber 2016). While social media has been undeniably instrumental in the shaping of collective actions and development of claims in most movements of the past two decades, numerous studies have emphasized the necessity of accounting for the interplay of online and offline politics rather than addressing online networks alone (Juris 2012; Della Porta and Mosca 2005) and providing a more nuanced view of social movements' collective identity in the digital age (Rohlinger and Bunnage 2018).

Table 1 summarizes how current theorizations of collective identity are unable to explain the development of a yellow vest collective identity: while the yellow vest movement produced a collective identity and collective actions, it did so based not on pre-existing demographic characteristics, clear-cut ideological features, pre-existing infrastructures, or central leaders (Confavreux 2019; Collectif d'enquête sur les Gilets Jaunes et al. 2019; Boyer et al. 2020). This nationwide movement did not seem to spring from pre-existing networks, as it quickly developed a collective identity, uniting people from rural, urban, and peri-urban areas, congregating through dispersed roundabouts (Ravelli 2020; Boyer et al. 2020), and while digital platforms played a role in the constitution of the movement (Morales, Cointet, Benbouzid, Cardon, Froio, Metin, Ooghe Tabanou, and Plique 2021), online activity and onsite protests mutually influenced one another all throughout the mobilization (Morales, Cointet, and Froio 2022). More generally, studying movements such as Occupy, which claims to be the 99%, or the *Indignados*, whose common characteristics boil down to an indignation against current policies, may require new analytical tools to make sense of the mechanisms underlying the forming and sustaining of a collective identity. Convinced that new theoretical approaches are necessary for understanding the emergence of collective identities within mass movements, we propose exploring the mechanisms of reactive identity to understand the forming and sustaining of collective identity.

### **USING THE CONCEPT OF “REACTIVE IDENTITY” TO UNDERSTAND THE EMERGENCE OF MASS MOVEMENTS’ COLLECTIVE IDENTITIES**

To make sense of the forming and strengthening of collective identity within heterogeneous initial groups lacking pre-existing infrastructures, we propose to build on the concept of “reactive identity formation” (Nagra 2011) developed to complement the initial concept of “reactive ethnicity” (Portes and Rumbaut 2001), coined in ethnic and migration studies. These concepts capture the formation of collective identities in relatively heterogeneous groups—such as pan-ethnic communities (Okamoto and Mora 2014)—or the reactivation of latent identities when faced with hostile environments (Nagra 2011; Chandio 2017). It stresses how reaction to and from one’s environment can induce, strengthen, and reactivate identification processes. Arguing that “the formation of reactive identities is not limited to ethnic groups” (2011, 426), Baljit Nagra extended the concept to other heterogeneous groups that primarily share an outsider position, taking the case of religious minorities, and defined “reactive identity formation” as “the social process in which marginalized individuals assert their identities” by “trying to cope with discrimination” and “resist[ing] to mainstream ideologies” as well as negative stereotyping (2011, 429). In this paper, we build on this concept of reactive identity formation and expand its use to the case of mass heterogeneous movements. Beyond cases of pan-ethnic, transnational, and religious minorities, we think expanding the current theorization of reactive identity formation could be useful for explaining how collective identities develop and sustain through different mechanisms of reaction, even for movements whose actors do not share any *a priori* experiences of stigmatization, commonalities, or structural locations.

This theoretical framework offers four helpful directions in developing our analysis of the yellow vest movement’s collective identity. First, previous theorization has shown how, by reacting to one’s environment, individuals with loosely connected identities can find a “new sense of belonging” that helps “dissolve the ambiguity and marginality” of mixed or disparate identities (Portes and Rumbaut 2001, 152). Alejandro Portes and Rubén Rumbaut illustrate this

point by discussing cases of mixed ethnicity (e.g., “half Latina and half Anglo” p.147) and showing how new overarching categories (e.g., Latina or Hispanic, p15) emerge and bind together heterogeneous groups coming from different nationalities, by developing symbolic ethnicity or symbolic religiosity (Gans 1979; 1979). This notion parallels the political theorizations of a “constitutive outside,” which argues that “in the absence of ontological grounding, identity constitution must take place against a ‘radical outside, without a common measure with the inside’ (Laclau 1990, 18)” (Richter 2019, 217; discussing Derrida 2005). While social movement theorists have stressed the role of the political environment through the concept of the political structure of opportunity to understand the political conditions that help movements mobilize or succeed (Meyer and Staggenborg 1996), with rare exceptions (Shriver and Adams 2013), this literature has not looked at how reacting to one’s environment can help crystallize new collective identities. The concept of reaction—and reactive emotions (Jasper 1998, 415)—is present in the social movement literature. Yet its role in shaping collective identities remains to be specified, especially for heterogeneous and fragmented groups not reacting to a common oppression. Scholars have stressed the role of “bodily reactions” and “reactive emotions” in shaping *ideologies* (Simi et al. 2017) and *subjectivities* (Fiorito 2019) and examined how reacting to external threats can foster *collective action* or *coalition* (Heaney and Rojas 2011), but they have not looked at how these reactions can contribute to creating *collective identities*. One concept—oppositional identity—inspired by oppositional consciousness (Mansbridge and Morris 2001)—points to the mechanism of “react[ing] defensively toward those who attack us and our kind” (Mansbridge and Morris 2001, 5). Yet this concept is mostly mentioned in passing and not clearly defined (Bayat 2013, 130; Dixon and Roscigno 2003, 1296; Horton 2004, 169; Polletta and Jasper 2001, 288). It is still assumed that there are pre-existing oppressed or stigmatized groups that must deal with an “underlying structure of historical domination” based on religion, geography, or a shared history of activism or segregation (Mansbridge and Morris 2001, 7–8). The same can be said about the us-versus-them dynamics in the creation of collective identity, where the pre-existence of an under-politicized “us” is still assumed (Polletta and Jasper 2001, 291). Thus, the notion of reactive identity formation helps conceptualize how heterogeneous groups develop a collective identity through collectively reacting to their environment.

Second, a crucial idea of reactive ethnicity and reactive identity formation is that subjective identification can intensify when the collective identity is stigmatized (Portes and Rumbaut 2001, 270) through a mechanism of “defense to threatened self-image” (Portes and Rumbaut 2001, 284) and as resistance to negative images and the portrayal of the group as violent (Nagra 2011, 433). For instance, the stigmatization of Muslim communities is perceived as increasing religiosity and intensifying identification (Nagra 2011; Chandio 2017). These mechanisms bring new perspectives to the social movement literature, which holds conflicting views on the roles of antagonism and pushback on the development of movements’ collective identities. Some social movement theories contend that “stigmatization from the outside often ends up blocking the development of a strong autonomous identity and limiting the possibilities for collective action” (Della Porta 1999, 107) and that “negative feedback” threatens collective identities overall (Rao, Monin, and Durand 2003, 813). This assumption is predominant in analyses of the LGBT movement (Armstrong 2002; Bernstein 1997; Valocchi 1999) and the animal rights movement (Einwohner 2002). These mechanisms underlying reactive identity formation are more in line with social movement theories that have analyzed how state repression and unjust authorities can reinforce identification with social movements (Della Porta 1999, 112; 2006; Gamson, Fireman, and Rytina 1982; Horton 2004).

Third, the theories of reactive identity formation invite us to think jointly about the multifaceted exchanges and various scales of interaction able to elicit reactive identity mechanisms from daily interactions (Nagra 2011, 431; Portes and Rumbaut 2001, 62; R. C. Smith 2014, 518) to political and legal changes (Nagra 2011, 437; Portes and Rumbaut 2001,

47) to backlash from various institutions, including family, school, and the workplace. All these different institutions can show hostility toward a given identity, which can intensify and reinforce identification processes, albeit in different ways (Nagra 2011, 437), creating dynamic and historicized trajectories of collective identities. We can use these insights in social movement theory by considering how multifaceted interactions reinforce emerging collective identities through backlashes in different social arenas.

Last, the concept of reactive identity helps us understand how these emerging reactive identities become the basis for specific forms of political action and resistance (Nagra 2011, 435). Emergent literature has built on reactive identity by developing the concept of “reactive transnationalism” (Redclift and Rajina 2021; Snel, Hart, and Bochove 2016) and suggested that reactive identity fosters specific repertoires of action (e.g., increasing transnational involvement with their countries of origin for immigrants). Similarly, scholars have suggested that Euroscepticism could be a byproduct of reactive identities (Vetik, Nimmerfelft, and Taru 2006, 1085; Trenz and de Wilde 2009), showing how this concept can be useful for studying a broad range of movements. More dialogue between social movement theories and reactive identities would be heuristic for understanding the development of collective identities that can foster specific forms of social movements and collective action.

These lines of theorization provided by the literature on reactive identity resonate with some of the dynamics of collective identity forming and sustaining observed during fieldwork. While members of the yellow vest movement were not a stigmatized group before this movement, as they were not part of a pre-existing group, they still developed their identity by reacting to their environment (the same can be said about the members of the Anonymous, *Indignados*, or Occupy movements). In that sense, collective identity can coalesce for groups not collectively facing *a priori* stigmatization but who become stigmatized as they mobilize to oppose their environment. Because the concept of reactive identity formation encourages engaging with different social spheres to understand the mechanisms of collective identity, it invites us to consider how collective identities unfold when the rejection comes from the state, police, families, media, or several sources simultaneously. Ultimately, these reactions and backlashes can also trigger and support collective action in the long run, and we wish to theorize further how reactive identity elicits specific repertoires of actions. In this paper, we rely on the reactive identity framework and mechanisms to capture the generative process that creates and sustains a new (imaginary) collective identity, despite the initial heterogeneity of a group. Before delving into the analysis of the yellow vest movement, we introduce the background and methods of this research.

## **BACKGROUND AND METHODS: EXPLORING THE DEVELOPMENT OF A REACTIVE COLLECTIVE IDENTITY**

### *Setting*

The yellow vest movement began in November 2018 after the French government announced a new taxation on individuals’ fuel consumption to fund environmental policies. This movement caught the international press’s attention and captured observers’ imaginations for several reasons. Initiated through anonymous calls on social media and online petitions, it flared up suddenly (300,000 protesters dispersed across France on the first day of protest) almost out of the blue, yet sustained an impressive weekly commitment from its members for over a year. These weekly occurrences were often described under the dramaturgical term “Act”; Act 53, celebrating the movement’s one-year anniversary in November 2019, saw about 28,000 people in the streets, according to the presumably conservative assessment of the French Interior Ministry. This movement jointly mobilized urban, suburban, and rural citizens; thousands of individuals joined the movement from geographically dispersed areas and started



to block roads, occupy roundabouts, open tolls for free, and join illegal protests on Saturdays in city centers.

The yellow vest movement elicited what appeared to be an unprecedented amount of media and social media attention (Poels and Lefort 2019),<sup>2</sup> notably focusing on the graphic representation of strong symbolic acts against the State (e.g., anti-government graffiti on the Arc de Triomphe and burning of a prefecture—a local government administration building—in Le Puy-en-Velay) and violent altercations between protesters and the police (Sebbah, Loubère, Souillard, Renard, Smyrniaios, and Marchand, 2019; Siroux 2020). Despite conflict escalation, many French citizens expressed sympathy for the uprising<sup>3</sup> and put their vests on their cars' dashboards or windows to show support. Yet, the movement also faced significant backlash: the government quickly discredited the mobilization and, surprisingly, many trade union representatives, known activists, and already existing social movements, as well as academics, did not support or join the movement and even condemned it at first (Noiriel 2019). After a few days, the claims of the movement diversified greatly. They tackled an increasing number of questions, including fiscal and social justice, dignity and the ability to live decently from one's job, and political considerations on the control of representatives (Collectif d'enquête sur les Gilets Jaunes et al. 2019; Marchand et al. 2019; Sebbah et al. 2019; Spire 2019). Many mentioned feeling as if they were erased from the political landscape or disapproving of the exclusionism of political institutions (Bantigny 2019); before joining the movement, they felt isolated and lacking the support of a local community (Floris, Gwiazdzinski, and Turco 2019).

The yellow vests rapidly organized through assemblies, always asserting their horizontality and decentralism (Jeanpierre 2019). While some “iconic figures” emerged at the national or local levels, they were often decried by members of the movement.<sup>4</sup> As previously discussed, the movement claimed to be nonpartisan (in the sense of rejecting any affiliation to a political party or an institutionalized political body *as a movement*) and gathered diverse profiles with regard to political criteria: voting practices, activist experience, perception of their positioning on the political spectrum, and previous political engagement. Furthermore, although most actors experienced economic precarity and belonged to the working and middle class, research observed significant variations in terms of different socioeconomic indicators (including occupation, wages, place of residence, age, marital status, and gender) (Bendali and Rubert 2021b; Collectif d'enquête sur les Gilets Jaunes et al. 2019). To that extent, the yellow vest constitutes an atypical case of collective identity developed in the context of a social movement lacking pre-existing commonalities, one that may echo recent and ongoing social movements, such as Occupy, or movements in Spain, Italy, Greece, and Hong Kong.

## DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

To capture the mechanisms leading to the formation and sustaining of this collective identity, we relied on an ethnographic research design and combined different data sources, namely participant observation, netnography (Kozinets 2010), interviews, and analysis of various textual sources.

We chose to center the analysis from November 2018 to June 2019, as these eight months constituted the most dynamic period of the mobilization in terms of the profusion of events, level of participation, and identity claims from the members. However, the data are part of a bigger project on French yellow vest mobilization, as the first author collected observational data from January 2019 to March 2020 (Covid-19 related lockdown), mostly in the area of Lyon, Rhône, France. This ethnography spanned more than 400 hours, more than 200 hours of which took place from January to June 2019, and in different spaces such as assemblies and local groups organized in and around Lyon, working subgroup meetings, city protests, and

roundabouts or tolls occupations (see appendix for further information on participant observation). The first author also observed one of the Assembly of the Assemblies (ADA) organized in Saint-Nazaire, where mandated and revocable representatives gathered at the national level to create connections, exchange information on their respective local situations, and reflect collectively. This participant observation elicited extensive fieldnotes—transcribed shortly after coming back from the field—and enabled this author to enter many online communities to conduct an online ethnography of this movement. This author collected data through group conversations on Facebook, Telegram, Signal, Discord, and over text messages, and engaged in observations on social media and platforms created by members of the movement, such as *La ligne Jaune* (“the yellow line,” meant to replace Facebook) and *Le Vrai Débat* (“The Real Debate,” created as a counter-proposition to the national consultation organized by the president, called *Le Grand Débat*, “The Great Debate”). Because the uprising of the yellow vests was highly controversial in France and subject to numerous contradictory reports, this ethnographic design made the collection of behind-the-scenes data possible (Katz 1997), which would not have been accessible through discourse analysis alone. Besides, “living inside the social situation” (Abbott 2004, 15) appeared to be the only way to engage with the actors and their day-to-day lives in depth due to the climate of distrust inside the movement resulting from police arrests.

To triangulate these data, we conducted twenty-three ethnographic interviews (Beaud 1996; Becker et al. 2004) varying from twenty to 150 minutes, mostly at participants’ houses or in coffee shops, starting in July 2019. These interviews aimed not to capture collective identity but to understand why people decided to mobilize and engage with the movement and how it affected their everyday lives and perceptions. Yet, activists continually brought up their understanding of being and identifying as a yellow vest. Most interviews occurred after extensive interactions during fieldwork. All but two interviewees accepted being tape-recorded and gave recorded informed consent. When the first author could not record (because of the illegal actions of the interviewees), extensive notes were taken. Because of the risks involved with some of the yellow vest protest actions, we took extra care to ensure anonymization. We sought to allow for wide variations across cases to capture the diversity of profiles within the movement. Therefore, we paid particular attention to age (23 to 70 years old), place of residence (urban, suburban, or rural), employment, social status, political inclinations (from extreme right to extreme left), and groups of reference at the local level, as well as means of action (from non-violent to black bloc tactics).

A last source of data was the texts produced by and about the movement. Being a participant in the movement, the first author collected documents, meeting minutes, records, photos, and videos produced by the local yellow vests themselves. These documents are ripe with rich data on how the yellow vests portray themselves and understand and describe the movement. To complement these data, we created a longitudinal dataset of the newspaper coverage of the movement. We collected all the articles from the English section of the international newspaper *France 24* (a publicly owned newspaper) for the first year of the movement ( $n=259$  articles) and collected occasional articles to grasp specific aspects of the movement at a macro-level (e.g., creation of alternative media, reaction to specific events). This last data collection was useful for identifying which events the movement reacted to and how they were portrayed in the press.

Identity emerged as a central theme early in the ongoing memos written by the first author during fieldwork (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995). With an external eye, the second author made similar observations when reading these fieldnotes, confirming this field intuition. Actors regularly asked themselves collectively what it meant to be a yellow vest, using the term “yellow vest” as a noun or an adjective, often in reference to moments when they experienced backlash due to belonging to the movement. Following this, the authors first coded the data by focusing on accounts and narratives of experiencing the yellow vest identity. Observation data and collective documents produced by field actors encompassed many instances of actors collectively making sense of their identity as a group. In both data sources, actors mentioned

their understanding of the socioeconomic environment and backlash from external actors. In a second coding round, the authors refined their analysis by identifying different forms of backlash experienced by the actors and gathering them into subcategories (national institutions, civil society, or individual encounters). They also traced all the national events that took place over the life of the movement and coded how the actors reacted to each of these events.

### **FORGING AND FUELING IDENTIFICATION PROCESSES BY COLLECTIVELY REACTING TO ONE'S ENVIRONMENT**

In this section, we examine how a “yellow vest” collective identity (both as a sense of “we” and as a recognition of a shared group by others) quickly crystallized through mass mobilizations and unpack how collective reactions and grievances, as well as backlash, helped bring together a heterogeneous group of people from different backgrounds under a collective identity. We propose to analyze two sets of mechanisms that favored the quick emergence and sustaining of a collective identity around the yellow vest, which did not exist prior to the movement. We first observe how reacting to one’s environment and acknowledging heterogeneous reactions constituted one of the foundations of the identification process for the yellow vests before showing how backlash also fueled this identification.

#### *Acknowledging the Yellow Vest Heterogeneity*

I see that things start to get heated around November seventeen [date when the movement started]. I hope things are moving forward, that people are getting motivated to go down in the street for real. Let’s block things for real [...] against the price of oil, against taxes, against everything, because we get screwed on every side. So, the people who are in for the movement, even if you can’t go out because you work or else... We all have this yellow vest in our car. So put it in the view of everyone on your dashboard. A little color code to show that you are in with us, with the movement. (Ghislain Coutard, video from October 25, 2018)<sup>5</sup>

This quote from one of the many Facebook calls promoting the start of yellow vest mobilization shows that an early rallying cry was their criticism of France’s social and political context. This criticism was not unique: beyond the question of individual fuel taxation, Ghislain Coutard mentions the feeling of being “screwed on every side” and encourages people to use the yellow vest as a symbol of general discontent. Many actors shared this idea, such as Francis, one of our interviewees, who explained that to him: “it wasn’t just about fuel [...] fuel] was the straw that broke the camel’s back. It’s the situation which exploded, people are fed-up, we’re taken for idiots more and more” (interview excerpt). From the beginning of the mobilization, actors were aware and acknowledged, if not emphasized, the heterogeneity of their socioeconomic backgrounds and political positions, as seen in this call to action from one of the initial figures of the movement: “We don’t care who voted for who, [...] we don’t care what political party you are in [...] I invite you to get in the streets on November seventeen. I received testimonies from two retirees [...], nurses, entrepreneurs, trucks drivers [...] policemen.”<sup>6</sup> Similarly, in interviews, many yellow vests recalled engaging with people from all political leanings and not using political affiliations to collectively define themselves, as described by Jimmy: “We managed to have people on all sides because people did not present themselves with political labels.”

As a result, the yellow jacket became a symbol of various oppositions in a matter of days; for instance, the initial rejection of an increase in fuel taxes denounced in Priscillia Ludosky’s online petition<sup>7</sup> as well as through some viral videos of early whistleblowers, which soon became identified with the yellow vest movement.<sup>8</sup> The yellow vests also opposed the

government and the French president Emmanuel Macron (Noiriel 2019), to suppression of taxes targeting the wealthiest (“Impôt Sur la Fortune”), and to the increased taxes targeting low-income people. The yellow vests recognized this variety and did not want to exclude some claims. They often emphasized that they wanted everyone to have a voice. In our observations, the local assembly consequently launched the first collection of claims on Facebook at the end of November 2018. Over 50 grievances were collected across members of the assembly in face-to-face interactions by the end of January 2019. Actors then organized public debates and discussions based on these grievances. Similarly, during the first ADA at the end of January 2019 in Commercy, a high-priority topic on the agenda was to “synthesize the claims from the bottom up” (Transcript of the ADA of Commercy). This effort resulted in a table of 731 claims sorted by subthemes, such as society and economy, justice, and government.

Debating and voting at the ADA of Commercy, however, was not meant to make decisions at the national level for every yellow vest group or to take any definite stands on any claims in the name of the yellow vests, but rather to give a “sense” of the direction of the movement. Actors accepted variations based on the sensitivity of each local group and a person willing to join the mobilization. As described by the representative of a local group in another ADA, accepting singularities was particularly important for the movement: “We are all different, we come from different social backgrounds and political views, but we are here because we are all yellow vests, and we are fed up.” (Delegate from Langon, 04/06/2019, Saint Nazaire ADA). Throughout fieldwork, the yellow vests often referred to the “*plurality of the yellow vests*” as a reason for their commitment. Florence described this as motivating her early engagement in the movement: “I went and talked ... well, and I realized there were people from all horizons. There were a lot of retired people, people who worked, well, you really had people from every, every horizon [...]. Beyond the price of the fuel, you could hear a lot of grievances which were political, social, democratic, fiscal. There was all a panel of things, I thought it was super interesting overall, and I stayed” (Interview excerpt).

#### *Fueling Collective Identity Despite and Through Heterogeneous Reactions*

Despite this heterogeneity in background and grievances, people gathered under the same symbol and promptly categorized themselves using the term “yellow vest.” As observed on social media at the end of November 2018, actors started to identify as yellow vests at the very beginning of the mobilization. For instance, they called the occupied roundabouts “their yellow vests camps,” and thousands of Facebook groups were created under the name “yellow vests,” usually associated with the location of each group (e.g., “Gilets jaunes Valence,” “Gilets Jaunes Roannais”). Press coverage shows the media also used the label “yellow vests” to qualify actors early in the mobilization (some even before November eighteen, 2018), and the movement quickly became recognized as a distinct collective group in public discourses.

If the initial rejection to fuel taxation constituted a trigger of the mobilization and allowed for the emergence of the symbol underlying the yellow vest collective identity, actors’ more systematic reactions to numerous institutional events and the overall socioeconomic environment appear also to have nurtured the identification process and contributed to regularly reaffirming their collective identity in the long run. The movement seized many opportunities in the French public debate to react publicly and deploy their mobilization. Table 2 (parts 1 and 2) describes the scope of this multifaceted reaction to events occurring within society: they reacted and opposed as a group through protests, counterstrategies (e.g., “the Real Debate,” alternative media channels), speeches, and texts, to events as diverse as the fuel price increase (November 2018), Macron’s public speeches and political decisions (December 2018, January, February, and April 2019), and cultural events, such as the Notre Dame reparation fund (April 2019). While some events were strongly related to the mobilization (such as the “Great National Debate” launched in January 2019), others appeared to have little connection with the movement, for instance, the police response to student protests in underprivileged areas of France in December 2018 or the repair fund of Notre Dame (April 2019). Yet yellow vests

groups reacted to both types of events through public declarations and collective actions, which reinforced the movement. Some of their repertoires of action appeared in themselves reactive: developing alternative media to criticize the biases of mainstream media, developing alternative social media to counteract Facebook’s surveillance, developing a debate platform called “real debate” to oppose the platform set up by the government. At the heart of their strategy was an effort to imitate, recuperate, and transform the institutions or structures they criticized.

**Table 2.** Yellow Vests’ Reaction to Various Events in France (part 1)

	Nationwide events/government reactions	Responses from the yellow vest movement
September to November 2018: inception of the movement	<p>9/20: Edouard Philippe, the French Prime Minister, defends the increase in fuel tax over the next couple of years</p> <p>Sept 2018: report by “Solidaires Finances Publiques” stating that tax evasion cost the government between €80 and 100 billion in 2017 to denounce tax evasion</p>	<p>10/10: two truck drivers from Seine-et-Marne, Eric Drouet, and Bruno Lefevre launched a Facebook call for a nationwide block to protest the fuel tax increase</p> <p>Several videos from yellow vest “whistleblowers” go viral: Ghislain Coutard (yellow vest as a rallying sign), Jacqueline Mouraud, and campaign against the rising price of fuel and toll</p> <p>11/15: first roundabout occupied in Eure department and operation of free-toll organized to protest the increased price of tolls near Pau</p> <p>11/27: first nationwide protest day counting more than 287,000 protesters and 3000 sites of protest throughout France</p> <p>11/29: petition initiated by Priscillia Ludosky against the rise in fuel taxes is signed by more than a million people in France</p>
December 2018	<p>12/3: student movements against the reform of the baccalaureate</p> <p>12/5: The government announces that the increase in fuel taxes is canceled for six months but refuses to re-establish the fortune-related tax.</p> <p>12/6: scandal as 151 high school students from Mantes la Jolie are forced to kneel down and arrested</p> <p>12/8: increased number of yellow vests injured because of the use of rubber bullets and sting-ball grenades and increased number of arrests (about 2000)</p>	<p>Early December: creation of the first “yellow vest media platform” such as “Vécu,” “Born to Be Jaune,” Jaune TV News”</p> <p>12/1: Damages of the French “Arc de Triomphe”</p> <p>12/3: yellow vests oppose government education reform (convergence with students’ movements)</p> <p>12/3: yellow vests block gas stations in Brittany (75 are out of stock) to protest the predicted increase in fuel taxes</p> <p>12/8: denounce police use of violence against high schoolers in Mantes la Jolie (asking students to kneel outside of their school), massive kneeling to express solidarity with the students arrested (Act 4)</p>

	12/10: discourse from Macron as a response to the yellow vest movement: increase of the minimum wage of 100 euros, suppression of a planned increased tax for those earning less than 2000 euros per month. Initiation of the “Grand Debate” to collect claims from the French population 12/18: start of the evacuation of different roundabouts	12/29: yellow vest gathering in front of different national media outlet to protest the negative portrayal of the movement in different media (Act 7)
January 2019 (part 1)	1/2: Eric Drouet, one of the leading figures of the movement, is arrested for the third time, causing reactions from different non-majority political figures 1/7: Edouard Philippe announces a revision of the protest freedom law, “anti-rioting law,” discussed at the National Assembly on January 29th and February 5th	1/5: increase in protest participation, trespassing in an annex of the finance ministry to protest the financial policies of the state, opposition to the lack of reaction to tax evasion 1/6: movement of women yellow vests, protesting notably against the violent turn of the protest and its repression

**Table 2.** Yellow Vests’ Reaction to Various Events in France (part 2)

	Nationwide events/government reactions	Responses from the yellow vest movement
January 2019 (part 2)	1/15: beginning of the “Great National Debate” [in French: Grand Débat National], launched by the government 1/26: Jérôme Rodrigues, a leading figure from the yellow vest movement, is injured (his eye), sparking important controversies on the use of different weapons by the police forces. He files a complaint the next day 1/29: Counsel of Europe denounces the police repression of the yellow vest movement as well as the new anti-rioting law	1/12: protest centered on the town Bourges, Toulouse, and Bordeaux to contest the centrality of Paris in the protests 1/26-27: first ADA in Commercy 1/26: protest weapons used by policemen (rubber bullets) as casualties in the yellow vest movement increases. 1/27: attempt at doing a “Yellow Night” to show a parallel with the movement of “Nuit Debout,” but the Republic Place is evacuated by tear gas and sting-ball grenade 1/30: launching of the platform “The Real Debate” (in French: le Vrai Débat) to counterbalance the platform created by Macron one month earlier
February 2019	2/2: antisemitic incidents during the yellow vest protest and antisemitic slurs against Finkielkraut on February 16th, which creates a viral controversy 2/20: Senate report on Benalla affair fuels protests	2/5: call for a general strike with different labor unions (CGT, Solidaires, FSU) response to the anti-riot bill (seen as an anti-freedom measure)
March 2019	3/12: Senate adopts the anti-rioting law without amendments. 3/15-30: end of the National Debate	3/16: Ultimatum I in Paris: after the end of the Great National Debate

	3/23: First prohibition of protesting	3/27: Toulouse University publishes the result of the “Real Debate,” which shows that the Citizen-led Referendum is the major claim of the yellow vest movement.
April 2019	4/4: Constitutional council censors some of the clauses of the anti-rioting law 4/10 “anti-rioter law” passes 4/15: fire of Notre Dame and billions pledged promptly after 4/25: Macron’s speech to announce the government’s decisions after the Great National Debate.	4/13: protest the law described as “anti-rioter law” 4/5 to 4/7: Second Assembly of the Assemblies, in Saint Nazaire 4/9: protest the privatization of Parisian Airport (a delegation was invited to talk at the Senate, but then canceled) 4/13: convergence with a professor’s strike and for the freedom to protest 4/20: Act 23 and 2nd Ultimatum from the yellow vest; protest after Notre-Dame fire, outrage at the billion euros collected promptly after the fire, and quick response from President Macro
May 2019	May Day: international labor day G7 Meeting in Metz European Elections	5/1: May Day: protest alongside union organizers 5/5-6: protest the environment G7 in Metz 5/25-26: protest the European elections

Similarly, the movement fostered its identity by rejecting the current political space and positioning itself in contrast to pre-existing movements and trade unions. For instance, during the ADA of Saint-Nazaire—a meeting that gathered representatives of local yellow vests groups from all over France for three days—actors claimed that the movement “belonged to no leaders, no elected representatives, no political party, no labor union, no ideology and no religion” (Annex 2, ADA Saint Nazaire, 03/06/2019). The actors’ documentation of this ADA shows the reasons for avoiding affiliation with political parties or unions were varied: refusal to be co-opted by a political party, rejection of the self-proclaimed yellow vests in political lists, and divergence in political leanings among the yellow vests, with no consensus found on voting advice beyond “all but Macron.”

At the local level, yellow vest activists regularly reacted to existing political organizations and movements, including anarchist groups, national trade unions, and political parties from the opposition. They perceived trade unions as being too institutionalized because these unions were invited to be “social partners” in collective agreements. For instance, in an assembly in January 2019, one activist passionately opposed allowing trade unionists to display their colors during protests: “I am not a leftist nor a rightist; I am a yellow vest. So, we must come to protests without the jacket CGT [a French trade union], without the jacket SNCF [train company]. With yellow vests and no other sign. Here, we are yellow vest.” (Fieldnotes, 14/01/2019). Jimmy also recalled telling an opposition party representative who came to meet their local group: “you put your jacket on, or you are out!” Similarly, while the movement joined climate marches to foster collaboration, the yellow vests re-expressed their differences with regards to these types of activists: during the local assembly we had the opportunity to observe, people argued that the climate movement was disconnected from “social matters” and their means of action differed from those of the yellow vests.

In sum, the movement’s collective identity was fueled by its common reaction against the overall socioeconomic environment and French political institutions. Surprisingly, it was not always the content of the claims *per se* which contributed to crystallizing the collective identity

but the action of acknowledging and gathering heterogeneous grievances. Because grievances were not definite or imposed, the movement's identity boundaries remained sufficiently loose, allowing for the convergence of a heteroclitic crowd of people who felt excluded from political debate while avoiding formulating a political program. Such reactive identity formation favored the coalescence of a heterogeneous group of people who condemned the exclusionist dimension of French institutions but did not have a common pre-existing identity. While yellow vest members promoted inclusiveness, they nevertheless developed their identity by asserting their differences from other activist groups collectively and restating their rejection of current French politics. In line with these findings, we argue that the identification process was fueled by this reactive approach, which enabled the creation of a group identity that did not pre-exist the mobilization without requiring that this group agreed on all of what being a yellow vest entailed.

#### *Sustaining Identification through Backlash*

In this second section, we argue that in addition to reactions to the overall environment, different types of backlash reinforced people's identification with the yellow vest movement through a mechanism of reactive identity that can elicit "defense to threatened self-images" (Portes and Rumbaut 2001, 284; see also Nagra 2011). Despite mainly negative comments and stereotypes about the movement, actors managed to assert the singularity of their position as an outsider and create an overarching category through which everyone could identify. Informants often expressed how their feelings of identification with the yellow vests built as they underwent backlash and felt stigmatized or repressed because they belonged to the movement. These forms of backlash compelled several actors to reclaim their belonging to the mobilization and their distinct identity as a yellow vest, both at the individual and collective levels.

We show how this mechanism played out in their interactions on three different levels: national institutions, such as the government, national police, or judicial system; civil society, such as conventional media, trade unions, and other movement organizations; and individual encounters with family, friends, and strangers. Tables three to five summarize how different types of backlash affected members of the movement: Column one of each table illustrates different types of backlash; column two shows how the yellow vests tapped into these experiences to reinforce their sense of collective identity and defend the movement's identity; column three describes how this sense of collective identity ultimately turned into collective action. These tables shed light on the mechanisms through which backlash reinforced identification and collective action, as summarized in the last column of each table.

#### *National Institutions*

Many yellow vest members regularly described how they experienced being treated differently from the rest of the population by state institutions when interacting with the police or judicial system, and in government speeches. At the level of the government, the yellow vest identity crystallized partly because several members of the yellow vest movement saw the attitude, words, and the ruling of French President Emmanuel Macron as "*spiteful*." Some phrases used by President Macron during speeches and visits contributed to a feeling of stigmatization and disconnection between the government and the people, as explained by Jocelyn, who felt "horrified" by Macron's "contemptuous" and "irritating" comments which reflected that he "was not at all part of his world" (see Table 3, A1).<sup>9</sup> Some statements made even before the movement, e.g., Macron referring to French citizens as "refractory Gallic" during a trip to Denmark or comparing "those who succeed and those who are nothing" while visiting the main French incubator in Paris, became common references within the movement to point out how Macron despised French citizens. During the yellow vest movement, he joked with the media that "Jojo the yellow vest was 'having the same status as a minister,'" which people interpreted as proof of contempt from the President.



This not only reinforced the spirit of dissent but also created forms of stigma appropriation (Toyoki and Brown 2014), whereby yellow vests re-appropriated these derogatory expressions to talk about themselves. This was the case for Sylvie, who claimed that she was “proud to be a [refractory Gallic]” (A2). François-Xavier, during our interview, also used these labels to qualify the mobilization when he said, “I am a yellow vest because I am outraged (...) and jojo with his yellow vest, it’s our dad, our cousin, our brother, our neighbor.” On certain occasions, the rejection or dismissive comments from the President<sup>10</sup> became a reminder of the group’s collective identity. Some actors, for instance, printed stickers with stereotypical symbols of Gallic people and the inscription “*Yellow vest, refractory Gallic,*” while others wrote some of these expressions on the back of their jackets. The phrase “*Macron Resignation*” also appeared as a frequent rallying cry. The debate about the call published after the second ADA illustrates this idea (A3): some actors did not want to vote for the text because they felt it was too tainted with left-wing political ideas from some subgroups present at the ADA, but people were united around the analysis of the government proposition as “*deceitful*” and a strategy to silence and break down the mobilization without real concessions. Some governmental propositions triggered collective action in some cases, as with the “*Vrai Débat,*” literally the “True Debate,” described in the previous section.

The response of the police to protests was also a strong rallying factor within the yellow vest movement. As highlighted in Table 3, actors felt as if they were being tracked by the police, which Veronique called “a real manhunt” (A4). Demonstrators referred to police searches, identity checks, and preventive arrests before and during protests to illustrate the “*repression*” (a word used by every interviewee to describe the state’s answer to the movement) taking place (see A3, A6). Many people were seriously injured during protests (144 seriously injured people<sup>11</sup> on 03/10/2020, according to the newspaper *Libération*), becoming martyrs and symbols of the yellow vest movement. For instance, in an interview, Francine lamented the police response to the movement by reaffirming her sense of belonging: “Our casualties should not exist.” The yellow vests constantly mentioned these topics during assemblies (A6), informal conversations, and online chats. They publicly disclosed police violence by showing photos of people injured by rubber balls and videos of police interventions. Actors explained that faced with this backlash, wearing the yellow vest became a way to display their identity and stand together in front of police repression. As Valentin recounted a clash with the police, he described the necessity of displaying and taking part in the collective identity in such a context, explaining that “not wearing a yellow vest [...] was [like] abandoning the others” (A5). This also became an incentive for collective action: yellow vest actors started to organize protests and collect money for people who were injured during protests. They began filming during protests to gather proof of police violence and testimonies to lodge a complaint at the United Nations Organizations in the name of the yellow vest movement (A6).

In court, yellow vests pointed out discrimination due to their belonging to the yellow vest movement, reinforcing identification and collective action. For instance, during activists’ trials, laws appeared to them as being enforced more strictly than for non-yellow vests. Bruno hyperbolically compared a “yellow vest who didn’t even protest” and was condemned to “8 months of jail” with someone arrested “130 times” who “assaulted a grand-mother” and got away with “probation” (A7). This feeling of injustice created cohesion among actors and a sense of belonging, as if they were “*a family,*” as formulated by many yellow vests. In the minutes of trials, arrested people were often referred to as “our yellow vest friends.” This quote from Francis highlights how some yellow vests reaffirmed the collective identity by forcefully defending the movement and experiencing hostility: “We still have rights in France but not the yellow vests. [...] there are still so many of us in jail [...] and] for me they are political prisoners” (A8). Turning this feeling of collective identification into collective action, yellow vests regularly organized gatherings in front of the courthouse wearing their color, i.e., yellow, during trials (A9). They often attended trials for support. A working group was organized to take

minutes of trials to document them and inform the rest of the movement. This group collected money to fund juridical procedures and created a list of lawyers favorable to the yellow vests' cause.

The last column of Table 3 shows how these various pushbacks against yellow vests led to different reinforcement of the yellow vest collective identity: reclaiming words used to dismiss them when denigrated by political figures, an increasing incentive to wear the yellow vest during protests as a response to the perceived police brutality against them; and reappraising the meaning of being trialed and penalized as they felt the courts were biased against yellow vests. This reinforcement of their collective identity favored collective responses to the different institutions attacking them.

**Table 3.** Backlash from National Institutions and Reaction from Yellow Vest Members

Perception of backlash	Reinforced identification and defense of the collective identity	From collective identity to collective action	Summary of mechanisms
Government			
[A1] "Some things horrified me completely, some comments completely contemptuous, irritating. And when [Macron] was away, he would often bring them up again. So very quickly, he was disconnected, according to me, from reality. And people who were really facing problems and difficulties at that time were not at all part of his world". (Interview with Jocelyn, 20.02.2020)	[A2] "Wait, a refractory Gallic, well yes, then. I am truly a refractory Gallic! Yes, and I am proud to be one." (Interview with Sylvie, 15.11.2019)	[A3] "And what is the answer of the government? Repression, disdain, denigration [...] Nothing in all of this will stop us!" (National Call of Commercy, 27.01.2019)	The perception of the government's contempt leads to reject political figures [A1], to reclaim the words used to identify yellow vest members as a new identity [A2], and incentivizes yellow vests to keep acting together [A3]
Police			
[A4] "We saw how things were going on, right. It was a real manhunt, clearly, of yellow vests. It was ... sometimes, it was horrible, right." (Interview with Véronique, 11.10.2019)	[A5] "Not wearing a yellow vest, it was abandoning the others, you know. Not wearing the yellow vest, it was like disengaging oneself from the thing, really. So at that point, I didn't have a yellow vest, you know, I didn't have one physically speaking. That is what made me tell myself, 'wow, I really need to buy one.'" (Interview with Valentin talking about a confrontation with police, 19.07.2019)	[A6] "A group was created among the actors of the assembly to fight against police repression. Among other things, the group has been trying to lodge a collective complaint to the UN. At the weekly assembly, someone is debriefing on an action in relation to this project. A group of yellow vests mobilized to go to Geneva to denounce police brutality and the use of rubber bullets to intimidate demonstrators. They organized a bus to get there. He explains that	The perception of police violence specifically targeting yellow vest members [A4] led more members of the yellow vest movements to wear the yellow vest to avoid "abandoning the other" [A5] and to a desire to act collectively to counter police brutality [A6]

about 1700 to 1800 went there in total, with their yellow vests, and demonstrated in front of the United Nations.” (25.02.2019, Fieldnotes from an assembly)

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Justice

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[A7] “When you see a man who went 130 times in front of the judge because he assaulted a grand-mother and broke her 32 teeth, they give him probation, and they tell him ‘it’s not nice, don’t do it again,’ and when a yellow vest who didn’t even protest gets eight months of unconditional jail sentence, you are telling yourself, there’s something happening here” (Interview with Bruno, 18.12.2019)

[A8] “They try to make us believe we have rights. Of course, we still have rights in France but not the yellow vests. (...) When you see how we get condemned, there are so many of us in jail, and we don’t talk about it! So, for me, they are political prisoners, that’s all.” (Interview with Francis, 30.07.2019)

[A9] “The assembly is ending, most of the people have already left, and we are about to leave the room when someone is shouting that the immediate summary trials of the people arrested during the protest of the week-end are still taking place right now. About twenty actors decide to go towards the law court. I follow them. They want to show support to those who are accused. We enter the law court to attend the trials. The guards do not let us enter. We stay in the hall while some are insisting and telling them that they have to let us in, legally speaking. The guys behind me tell me they will soon call the police to quick us out.” (14.01.2020, Fieldnotes)

The perception of the justice system’s bias against the yellow vest movement [A7] led to a reappraisal of penalization: the justice system is called into question, and yellow vests defend their integrity (not a thug) [A8]. This also led to collective action supporting those facing trials and challenging the legitimacy of the court [A9].

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*Civil Society*

Members of the movement also gave accounts of experiencing backlash from other institutions or groups in civil society, such as the media, trade unions, and social movement organizations. These narratives were particularly vibrant in collective conversations. They referred to strong symbolic violence when watching the news on TV channels in “*the mainstream media*,” where yellow vests were invited to participate, as well as a mismatch between their own representations of the movement and the way they were pictured in the press (Table 4, B1, B2). Yellow vests resented the media because of their choices in news coverage and felt “stigmatized” as a collective, as mentioned by Francis (B1). Similarly, Julien expressed in his interview, “They want us to literally fuck it up, right, to be ridiculed” (B2) and described suffering from the disconnection of the media with “the reality on the ground,” where experts would use technical terms as a mean to delegitimize the movement when activists wanted to express their grievances (B2). Interestingly, Julien reacted to this type of backlash by reclaiming some of the elements used to stereotype the members of the movement as positive dimensions

of the yellow vest collective identity. For instance, he defended the emotional nature of actors' unprepared discourses and described them as manifestations of "free speech" "from their heart," which constituted "one of the strengths of the yellow vests." He ultimately concluded his interview by reaffirming his identification with the movement and hope for the collective, emphasizing that he felt this way despite hostility and "institutional violence."

Some informants felt the need to demonstrate that the yellow vests were not what was shown on TV. Local groups organized food assistance for homeless people, gatherings open to people outside the movement, and walking and biking trips across France to visit other roundabouts and give visibility to their discontent. In addition, alternative images of the yellow vests, such as the movie "*J'veux du soleil*" [I want some sun], became symbolic of what it meant to be a yellow vest. Many actors strongly supported the film. In reaction to the experienced stigmatization from the "*mainstream media*," some actors decided to launch their own communication channels to "counter media with information for the yellow vests [and] from the yellow vests," as emphasized by Florence (B3). Different online platforms were launched with news articles written by people from the movement, with regular updates on local groups' actions. These forms of collective action seem to stem directly from this process of reactive identity formation.

Regarding other forms of organized political groups (political parties, trade unions, and other social movements), actors often feared the movement would lose its authenticity by being recycled by more experienced activists. They also regretted that these other political groups did not join the yellow vest effort (B4) and sometimes demonstrated disdain or condescension towards them (B6, B5). However, this reception of the movement often reinforced actors' identification and increased their attachment to the symbols of the movement, such as the yellow jacket. Francine, for instance, reported an exchange with a trade unionist friend who was asked to take off her yellow vest during a protest organized by the unions and decided to keep it on anyway. Francine emphasized that this made her friend "more like us" (us, the yellow vests), especially as she was "fair in her head." This way, Francine restated her belonging to the yellow vests while defending and valorizing this collective identity (B5).

This experience of rejection also shaped yellow vests' decisions and reflections on how to collectively act: for instance, should they converge with the climate marches, or did these organizations want to "make the number" without really believing in the yellow vest movement? After a convergence between protests, many yellow vests felt that the environmentalists criticized and despised them (B6). Another question was whether protests should be declared in the prefecture. Many believed that declaring protests, like the trade unionists, made the cortege look like a "*carnival parade*" or a march, which would not sufficiently show their anger and would not represent the yellow vests. In that sense, the building and sustaining of collective identity through the mechanisms of reaction directly impacted the repertoires of action of the movement.

The last column of Table 4 shows how yellow vests built and sustained their collective identity and collective action when faced with backlash from civil society actors. When yellow vests experienced backlash through conventional media, they started to regularly confront the discourse on their collective identity by providing a more positive image of themselves. Ultimately, they chose to act collectively by building alternative media to present their perceptions of events. Similarly, their altercations with political organizations set in relief the similarities in their individual experiences and understanding. The fact that they felt rejected by these parties stimulated them to collectively coordinate to promote their own movement.

**Table 4.** Backlash from Civil Society and Reaction from Yellow Vest Members

Perception of backlash	Reinforced identification and defense of the collective identity	From collective identity to collective action	Summary of mechanisms
Media			
[B1] “I think actually that we ... it’s stigmatized, the media stigmatized us.” (Interview with Francis, 26.07.2019)	[B2] “What pains me with the yellow vests, with regard to institutional violence, it’s that ... the way they publicize the yellow vests. That is, on the TV or in interviews and all this, often, when we say something relevant, it’s cut [...]. It’s difficult ... to be in front of the media, especially when we know what the media are expected from us, right ... They want us to be literally fuck it up, right, to be ridiculed as a matter of fact [...]. [The specialists on TV] have departed from the voice of the heart. I think it’s ‘feet on the ground, heads in the stars, and hearts with the people.’” (Interview with Julien, 05.09.2019)	[B3] “The nice idea, at the beginning, was to really have a counter media with information for the yellow vests, from the yellow or less neutral in comparison of what we could hear in the media [...] The idea was to have representatives [...] for each site with regard to the decision-making of each site. And that’s how it was born. It was born of this will of pooling things, to make information, well, that the yellow vests could relate to” (Interview with Florence, 28.10.2019)	The perception of the stigmatization of the movement by conventional media communication [B1] provides the conditions for producing a positive discourse on the identity of the yellow vest [B2] and ultimately triggers the willingness to promote the yellow vest identity and create an alternative discourse on the events through a counter media [B3]
Other activist organizations			
[B4] “I used to have a lot of respect for these people ( <i>talking about the trade unions</i> ), but it’s a none-sense for me that they did not join the yellow vests on November 17 <sup>th</sup> actually [...] We had the opportunity to celebrate a merry Christmas all together [...] but everyone went home, and that was it! Except for the yellow vests!” (Interview with Julien, 05.09.2019)	[B5] “For May 1 <sup>st</sup> , this year, they were alone in [name of the neighborhood], Force Ouvrière [a French worker trade union]... Because I know a yellow vest from the round-about who is FO, who is representative FO, and she said to me, ‘I was there with my yellow vest, they didn’t agree, and I kept it on because you know (laugh)... and then when we arrived down the hill, I came with you’ [I have a colleague], she is FO, but you see, she is more like us ( <i>us meaning the yellow vest</i> ), [...] she is fair in her head [...] I	[B6] “J. explains that apparently, some climate activists gave “some not very appreciable glances” to the yellow vests. People agree at the table that, overall, they have a negative image of the yellow vest movement, and converging is always one-sided. “Nobody wants us!” W. interjects, half whispering, half out loud. [...] He thinks there is a huge work of communication to do to be able to work together.” (Excerpt from fieldnotes, meeting to organize next actions and demonstrations 16.05.2019)	The perception of rejection from other more institutionalized social movements and trade unions [B4] led to a strong feeling of similarities and understanding among the yellow vests actors (“she is more like us”) [B5] while at the same time providing a baseline to collectively act to communicate positively about the yellow vest movement [B6]

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can talk with [her].”  
(Interview with Francine,  
15.11.2019)

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### *Individual Encounters*

Finally, at the individual level, actors explained sometimes facing disbelief and criticism from their friends, families, and strangers in the street. Informants explained that the yellow vests suffered from a negative image, and actors in the movement were portrayed as violent and living on public assistance (Table 5, C1, C4). During interviews, Martine remembered her friends “in good situations [...] call[ing] the yellow vests deadbeats,” while Kevin recalled bystanders being surprised that the yellow vests were not breaking anything during an action meant to allow free parking slots for hospital visitors. Yet, these types of comments from friends and strangers motivated them to either defend the movement or “wear their color” (C2, C3, C5, C6). They would display their belonging to the yellow vest movement to counter the stereotypical views of public opinion (C2, C5). For instance, many activists revealed their yellow vest identity at their workplaces. This is the case for François-Xavier, who wore his yellow vest to work in a train station, to “make [people] understand [...] in spite of everything that the media could say, they are people who have a job...” or Florence, who displayed her identity to show “there are also women and ‘normal people’” in the movement. For Julien, this “makes people doubt a lot” their assumptions of the movement. With relatives, however, these interactions were sometimes more difficult, provoking “tensions,” “arguments,” and even “break-ups” (C4, C6).

**Table 5.** Backlash in Individual Encounters and Reaction from Yellow Vest Members

Perception of backlash	Reinforced identification and defense of the collective identity	From collective identity to collective action	Summary of mechanisms
Strangers			
[C1] “Because now, when you wear a vest ... there are people that think you are violent. When we opened up the fences at the hospital, there are people who said, ‘but you are not violent; what are you doing? You are not going to break the fences?’ Well, no, we are not going to break the fences...” (interview with Kevin, 26.06.2019)	[C2] “My motivation [for wearing the vest at work] is to make people understand, the people who see me like this, a guy, an unknown guy wearing a yellow vest ... even though everything that the media could say ... there are people that are having a job [...] It was a way to show my convictions and to show that we were still here and ... and proud to wear the yellow vest because it represented some things behind it.” (Interview with François-Xavier, 11.07.2019)	[C3] On the docks, a group of young people, around 20 years old, are sitting at the terrace of a pub. In a silver bucket, several bottles of what seems to be wine, and on the table, plates of food. They seem to make fun of the protest. An old man with a yellow vest answers back and tells them to come closer to say what they think. A car stands between them. The old man gets mad and goes in their direction to fight. Everyone is around them, either defending the old man or trying to separate them, without success. (Fieldnotes excerpt, 02.02.2019)	The perception of backlash from strangers who do not participate to the movement [C1] motivates people to act collectively [C2] and defend each other when under attack by outsiders [C3]

## Family and Relatives

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<p>[C4] “I have other friends, mainly men, who are in good situations, high social class, physicians, architects, engineers (smile)... I don’t even caricature ... and who they call the yellow vests deadbeats, who don’t understand that I am part of this game ... and there is a lot of tension because I think that ... I think that at some point, there is going to be a break-up” (Interview with Martine, 16.06.2019)</p>	<p>[C5] “We need to have the courage to wear the yellow vest as much as possible because it makes people who know us doubt a lot, actually... people tell me: “ah, but Julien, why are you doing this?”... Well, why wouldn’t I, by the way? I feel that I have more reasons to wear it than reasons not to.” (Interview with Julien, 05.09.2019)</p>	<p>[C6] “My dad watches TV a lot, unfortunately, he does not have access to the internet, and he says: ‘Well, I see on TV what is happening, right! So, I am neutral’. Well, no, actually, TV is not neutral, so you can’t be neutral. But yeah, it’s... I am not neutral either since I am a yellow vest, so I have a hard time being neutral. [...] We have a tendency to argue a little, so sometimes, we try not to talk about it, and he says to me, ‘I’m fed up with you’ (laugh)” (Interview with Gaëlle, 31.07.2019)</p>	<p>The perceived pushback from family and friends leads to familial tensions and “break-up” [C4], to increased pride and gives “courage to wear the yellow vest” [C5] and stand up for the movement in front of family members [C6]</p>
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In sum, this section demonstrates how backlash often forged and reinforced identification with the yellow vest movement. In most cases, actors described how they experienced the need to defend the movement and its claims in response to negative depictions and often felt pride at belonging to the movement. This pride gave strength to the group to individually and collectively mobilize and act during protests, assemblies, and informal conversations. In a sense, the experienced backlash catalyzed their identification with the movement at the individual level. While most of the social movement literature conceptualizes feelings of identity at the individual level as a basis for collective identity, we found that a strong element sustaining identification with the yellow vest movement was taking part in collective action and facing backlash and pushback, which elicited pride in being a yellow vest and defiance towards adversarial institutions.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

With this article, we have argued that the concept of reactive identity is a powerful tool for understanding the current development of collective identities within heteroclitic mass movements reacting to their socioeconomic environment. Based on the case of the yellow vest movement, we highlighted two significant mechanisms for analyzing the development of social movements’ collective identity. First, we explained that in heterogeneous groups of people with diverse socioeconomic statuses, political views, and organizing tactics, and without pre-existing connective infrastructures, a collective identity can emerge through reacting collectively against one’s environment. In the first part of our analysis, we detailed how yellow vest members coalesced and made sense of their collective identity by regularly standing in opposition to various aspects of their environment, including government decisions and announcements, economic policies, and even the management of some social events. We also showed that acknowledging the diversity of the actors in the movement and their reactions, without

prioritizing one over the other or classifying them, contributed to the constituting and sustaining of this collective identity. This identity remained sufficiently loose and malleable to accommodate diverse interpretations of what it means to identify as a yellow vest. This consequently allowed for the identification of heterogeneous actors with the yellow vest movement.

In the second part of our analysis, we showed how experiencing backlash was often a source of reinforced identification with the yellow vest movement. Throughout our analysis of Tables 3 to 6, we showed different mechanisms through which members reclaimed their identification with the yellow vest movement when it appeared under attack (discredited by political figures, targeted by the police or courts, stigmatized by the media). We described different mechanisms of increased identification with the yellow vest's collective identity after backlash, such as taking more pride in being a yellow vest (A2, C2, C5), feeling an urge to "show one's color" (A5, A9; C2); reclaiming words used to discredit the movement (A2); engaging in stigma re-appropriation (Toyoki and Brown 2014); setting out to develop more positive images of the yellow vests (B2, B6); amplifying similarities between yellow vest members (B5); and reinterpreting institutional arrangements that disfavor the group (A8). Simultaneously, the reinforcement of this collective identity triggered collective action to respond to the pushback. Collective action and enhanced identification mutually reinforced one another in an iterative fashion. By collectively reacting against the social, political, and economic environment, the yellow vests experienced an increasing sense of collective identity. This increased sense of collective identity escalated when facing backlash from national institutions, civil society, and individuals. Together, these forms of backlash and consequent reinforcement of identification helped trigger new collective actions and maintain the movement's dynamics.

Through our analysis, we contribute to the existing social movement research on collective identity and the ethnic studies literature on reactive identity. First, this paper contributes to social movement theory by refining our understanding of collective identity formation in social movements. While a rich literature exists on this question, we propose a theoretical framework through which we analyze processes of collective identity formation in the context of heterogeneous groups with little or no pre-existing commonalities, networks, or infrastructure, and without univocal leaders. Specifically, we address the central role of social actors' reactions to their overall environment, as well as their experiences of pushback in the emerging, sustaining, and reinforcing of identification with a social movement. While existing research has documented how the experience of stigmatization can lead to the forming and sustaining of a politicized identity, for instance, in the context of extreme right movements and political parties (Klandermans, Linden, and Mayer 2005; Klandermans and Mayer 2013; Tristant 1987), our analysis goes beyond these findings by showing how these mechanisms may still hold independently of political heritages and legacies or a pre-existing shared identity. Our study also provides alternative results to some analyses that have described how increased pushback or stigmatization can weaken a social movement, leading them to either seek acceptance or demobilize (Della Porta 1999, 107; Armstrong 2002; Bernstein 1997; Valocchi 1999; Einwohner 2002).

A second contribution to social movement theory is to show the many forms of backlash and their dynamic effects on maintaining a movement's collective identity over time. While the idea of oppositional consciousness has already been used to explain the role of similar mechanisms in the development of a social movement, few scholars have shown that experiencing multiple forms of backlash within different social spheres can reinforce collective identities within a social movement. The articles that have explored similar mechanisms of collective identity reinforcement have mostly focused on how social movements can be reinforced by state repression (Della Porta 1999, 112; 2006; Gamson, Fireman, and Rytina 1982; Horton 2004). We expand this argument by showing how negative media portrayals, backlash within day-to-day interactions with family and friends, court judgments, and police violence, have contributed to reinforcing identification with the yellow vest movement.



Second, this paper provides new insights into the literature on reactive identity and ethnicity. We build on this thread of research in ethnic and migration studies by further developing how the mechanisms underlying reactive identity have led to the development of collective actions, as the third column in Tables 3-6, entitled “From collective identity to collective action,” illustrate. Actors not only self-identified with a certain movement when experiencing backlash but also reacted, mobilized, and organized together, reinforcing the process of collective identification and developing a reactive repertoire of action. In our case, the yellow vests mirrored some institutional strategies, one of the most relevant examples being the organization of the “Real Debate” to answer the “Great Debate.” We contribute to the literature exploring how reactive identity shapes a specific repertoire of collective action, as with the literature on reactive transnationalism (Redclift and Rajina 2021; Snel, Hart, and Bochove 2016). Additionally, the different mechanisms of enhanced identification we have described (pride, desire to show one’s color, stigma re-appropriation, desire to develop a more positive image of one’s group, feeling of increased commonality within the group, and reinterpretation of institutional arrangements that disfavor the group) can also be used to refine our understanding of reactive identity overall. They show that the mechanisms underlying reactive identity are varied and multilayered.

What is little intuitive in this research is that reactive identity mechanisms enabled the formation of a collective identity that did not pre-exist in these collectively expressed reactions to the socio-political environment. While the mechanisms underlying reactive identity are usually studied in contexts where the involved population is already experiencing stigmatization in their everyday life at an individual level, our study explores a case in which social actors were not confronted with collective stigmatization before joining the movement. While some of them felt previously erased and not taken into account (Bantigny 2019), the majority appeared to experience increased feelings of rejection after they joined the yellow vest movement. Individual processes of identification became intrinsically connected to and sustained by the collective mobilization and subsequent backlash, which triggered a profound feeling of stigmatization. For instance, in the context of judicial trials or media coverage, this backlash might not have been experienced by the actors had they not collectively mobilized. And yet these experiences of backlash triggered and later consolidated their belief in the unfairness of the juridical, political, and mediatic system and consecutively reinforced their identification with the movement.

Reactive identity formations may therefore prove instrumental in explaining the development of collective identities for heterogeneous groups who feel erased, invisible, or forgotten, as the reactive identity mechanisms at first allowed for the movement’s actors to appear in the public and political space. At the same time, social actors made themselves vulnerable to stigmatization and ultimately backlash by becoming visible through reacting to their environment. In that sense, although reactive identity often appears as a defense mechanism for a group feeling threatened in their self-image, these mechanisms applied to mass movements without pre-existing commonalities may also provide a basis for producing a stigma that did not necessarily exist before the mobilization. We believe similar mechanisms should be studied for other activists who are not *a priori* stigmatized before their involvement in social movements, such as the current anti-austerity movements, Anonymous, and more classic conservative movements, such as Q-Anon, and white supremacist movements.

Overall, our study opens multiple avenues for further research. First, one could explore how strategic repertoires deployed by people may vary according to how their collective identity was formed. In our case, mechanisms of reactive identity formation have led not only to the development of civil disobedience and direct opposition to police in the streets but also to the development of alternatives to the existing political and media system, such as alternative media and alternative tools for direct participatory democracy. One could also explore the long-term evolution of movement identities created through mechanisms of reactive identity.

Although we did not expand on this topic due to word constraints, we noticed that most actors, while still identifying themselves as yellow vests in the long run, put their yellow vest on the back burner to give primacy to other forms of political action (e.g., electoral politics, other social movements, use of radical tactics such as black bloc), but re-engaged in times of crisis, such as the outset of the Covid-19 pandemic or the movement against the Global Security Law. Understanding this question could allow for a better grasp of the mechanisms of movement spillover and abeyance in the long run.

Second, this study invites us to think about the scope and boundary conditions for developing these forms of reactive identity. If facing pushback can either strengthen or weaken a movement, it is necessary to understand under what conditions the following is most likely to occur: Until what point is pushback helpful for reinforcing a collective identity? To what extent does visible backlash—through social media, for instance—play a role in the emergence and sustaining of this reactive identity? Does pushback always play out within all different social spheres at once? And if not, how would that shape movements? What are the long-term effects of backlash on identification with a movement that faces stigma?

Last, researchers could expand our study to other mass anti-austerity movements, such as Los Indignados, the Greek anti-austerity movement, the Sardines movement in Italy, the Anonymous movement, or the Occupy movement. These movements share many of the characteristics of the yellow vest movement in that they lack most of the pre-existing conditions necessary for the emergence of a collective identity according to the literature (Kanellopoulos et al. 2017; Perugorria, Shalev, and Tejerina 2016) and are organized through dispersed locations, choosing leaderless and horizontal forms of organizing (Reinecke 2018; Kousis 2016; Massa 2017). Another fruitful avenue is whether and how such reactive identity mechanisms are at play in other types of movements, such as alt-right, white supremacists, conservative, and pro-conspiracy movements. These cases could constitute valuable settings for comparing our results, understanding under what conditions collective identity may emerge from the mechanisms of reacting to one's environment and backlash, and ultimately, refining the boundary and scope conditions of the dynamics of reactive identity.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> We used italics quotations without specific names to refer to expressions and sentences said recursively by many different people throughout fieldwork. For instance, idioms like “Macron, resignation” or “police repression” were too common to be attributed to a single actor. The mention of “apolitical” here is interesting because it mostly signifies that the people from this movement wanted to stay away from institutional forms of politics. Later during fieldwork, actors ended up debating whether they should use the term “apolitical” or “apartisan.” It by no means signifies that there are no political goals to this movement, which, as we describe, developed many claims that aimed at changing the political landscape.

<sup>2</sup> Researchers compiled web documents on the movement when it emerged over the span of a few days and computed 2,312,593 tweets, 549 press articles, and 37,251 Facebook posts about the movement in less than a week (Sebbah et al., 2018, p. 2). In June 2019, they collected about 117,351 press articles on this movement, i.e., more than 10,000 articles per month since the inception of the movement (Sebbah et al. 2019, 1).

<sup>3</sup> According to Harris interactive polls, on December 3, 2018, 72% of people said they supported the movement. Ifop and Fiducial opinion polls, retracing support for the movement from November 2018 to November 2019, found similar features.

<sup>4</sup> For instance, Ingrid Levasseur, who wanted to run for the European Parliament elections, ultimately chose to withdraw her candidacy after being heavily criticized and even insulted and threatened by movement actors.

<sup>5</sup> French textual sources, interview excerpts, and fieldnotes excerpts are translated by the authors.

<sup>6</sup> Jaqueline Mouraud : Oui au blocage du 17 novembre 2018 : [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U4\\_m8aZ253A](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U4_m8aZ253A)

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.change.org/p/pour-une-baisse-des-prix-%C2%A0-la-pompe-essence-diesel>

<sup>8</sup> E.g., Jaqueline Mouraud's video that reached six million views in November 2018 and denounced a “hunt on drivers,” the increased numbers of speed cameras, increasingly stringent rules for car technical control, and the disconnect of political elites from the consequences of changes in macro-policies for cars and taxes. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=06pOTxTvnBU>, retrieved on 03/09/2020)

<sup>9</sup> To better orient our readers regarding our different tables, we chose to number each cell so the specific quotes based on our argument could be more easily identified.

<sup>10</sup> For many movement actors, Emmanuel Macron embodies the trajectory of the French elite, as he was trained in the main elite school for public administration (Ecole Nationale d'Administration), worked in large banks such as

Rothschild, and was Minister for Finance in the previous socialist government.

<sup>11</sup> According to their definition, seriously injured included people with a ripped-off limb, organs losing their main function, fractured bones, severe burns, and open wounds to the head.

### APPENDIX – DESCRIPTION OF DATA COLLECTION

Sources	Location	Number of hours between January and June 2019	Total number of hours
<b>Meetings for organization</b>			
	Local assemblies	88	111
	Assemblies of assemblies (with representatives of local groups from all over France)	72	72
	Working groups	36	45
	Meetings from other political groups in connection with the yellow vests	5	9
<b>Protests</b>			
<b>Offline observations</b>	Roundabouts and tolls occupations	4	20
	City center demonstrations	35	90
	Public interventions and debates	8	10
	Court	1	10
<b>Informal exchanges</b>			
	“Debriefing night out,” post protests or assemblies	Regularly throughout the fieldwork	
	Informal drinks not directly related to fieldwork	Regularly throughout the fieldwork	
	Online observations of social media interactions	Regularly throughout the fieldwork	
	Online conversations through social media instant messaging and phone calls	Regularly throughout the fieldwork	
	Mailing list	500 emails	1534 emails
	Online observations of social media interactions	Regularly throughout the fieldwork	
<b>Online observations</b>	<b>Videos</b>		
	Testimonies from actors	3,5 hours	
	Protest teasers	For each protest	
	Video of protests	For each protest or action	
	Video of calls from assemblies of the assemblies	6 hours from AdA of Commercy	
	Video of the assemblies of the assemblies	For each AdA	
<b>Interviews</b>	Twenty-three interviews ranging from twenty to 150 minutes		

Press Coverage	
Press coverage Le Monde	52 articles
Press coverage France 24	259 articles
Press coverage on the assembly of the assemblies of Saint Nazaire	Around 100 articles
Textual Data	Documentation Produced by Actors
Personal analysis and testimonies	4 written documents
Minutes of local assemblies	22 minutes
Minutes from trial	26 minutes
Transcription and documentation of assemblies of assemblies	400 pages

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