Anti-vaccination as political dissent – a post-political reading of Yellow Vests’ accounts of Covid-19, vaccines and the Health pass

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Abstract
This article theorizes the connection between political distrust and conspiracy theories through a post-political framework. Following Luc Boltanski’s focus on the critical capacities of ordinary actors, it builds on interviews with participants of the Yellow Vest Movement in France who hold conspiratorial views of Covid-19 and the vaccine. The article explores how the interviewees’ critique mirrors that of post-political theorists. In particular, I use Rancière’s notion of subjectification and politics to theorize how conspiracy theories function as a means of dissent in the interviewees’ understanding of their experiences as well as in their own critique of and disillusionment with politics in France. As such, this article explores how political trust affected reactions to the pandemic, how political trust is interconnected with conspiracy theories and finally how such conspiracy theories can be viewed as biproducts of the post-political order.

Keywords
Yellow Vest Movement, conspiracy theories, post-politics, Rancière, France, Covid-19, political theory

Introduction
The introduction of the vaccine in the spring of 2021 changed the course of the Covid-19 pandemic. In France, popular scepticism towards the vaccine was relatively high, and in the summer of 2021, the Macron-government introduced a Health pass (pass sanitaire).
which meant that one had to be vaccinated or recently have been tested negative for Covid to be allowed entrance to certain public spaces (Ward et al. 2022). The introduction of the Health pass was met with massive popular outcry and large demonstrations in the late summer (Ward et al. 2022). Many of the demonstrators were former participants of the Yellow Vest Movement (YVM), which began in the late fall of 2018, and gathered approximately 3 million people in its one and a half year’s course (Dormagen and Pion 2021). This article is centred around the accounts of four participants in the YVM and is concerned with how these interviewees’ experiences in the YVM shaped their view on the pandemic, vaccination and the Health pass. I use the post-political critique of contemporary politics (Rancière 1999; Rancière 2021; Rancière 2001; Mouffe 2005; Crouch 2004; Žižek 1999) as my point of departure, and treat my interviewees as political theorists that reflect on their own role as demonstrators, but also on the malfunctions of French contemporary politics. In particular, I use Rancière’s notion of subjectification and politics to theorize how conspiracy theories function as a means of dissent in the interviewees’ understanding of their experiences as well as in their own critique of and disillusionment with politics in France.

The article thus attempts to fill several research gaps. Although there have been conducted quantitative studies on the relationship between political trust and attitudes to the Health pass and vaccination in France (Spire, Bajos, and Silberzan 2021; Ward et al. 2020), qualitative studies are yet to appear, nor has there been published research on the links between the YVM and attitudes towards the pandemic, vaccination and the Health pass. More importantly, while the YVM has been thoroughly theorized (Rancière 2019; Rosanvallon 2020; Hayat 2021), there still lacks theorization of the relationship between political trust and attitudes to Covid-19 and vaccines. This is what I try to amend in this article. Therefore, the article is of interest outside the specific context of the YVM and France, as it analyzes how political trust affected reactions to the pandemic, how political trust is interconnected with conspiracy theories and finally how such conspiracy theories can be viewed as biproducts of the post-political order.

First, however, I will briefly present the YVM and a chronology of the pandemic and vaccination-measures in France:

Originally a protest against the Macron-government’s proposed rise in fuel prices, the YVM soon adopted other issues such as demands for constitutional reform, more use of referendums and better social- and working rights. The YVM was by many seen as a revolt against the neoliberalism of president Emmanuel Macron, but also against the current system of political representation, similar to the anti-austerity movements that appeared in several countries almost a decade earlier (Hayat 2021; Rosanvallon 2020). Studies show that the YVM was characterized by the proportion of participants and supporters that did not place themselves on the political left/right spectrum (60%), and by the share of participants that voted for either the radical right or the radical left (Collectif d’enquête sur les Gilets Jaunes et al. 2019; Algan et al. 2019).

The intensity of the weekly YVM-demonstrations had largely diminished when Covid-19 hit France in 2020. Macron imposed relatively harsh lockdown measures, such as 6. pm curfews (Desson et al. 2020, 438). France is traditionally known as a country with a high level of vaccine hesitancy (Ward et al. 2019; 2020; 2022; Spire, Bajos, and Silberzan 2021),
and this was also true for Covid-19. Lindholt et al.’s (2021) comparative study show that France, together with Hungary, had the lowest level of vaccine acceptance between September 2020 and February 2021, only 47%, even though the acceptance rate went up during this period. In June 2021, vaccination coverage reached a plateau of 60% (Ward et al. 2022). In July, the Health pass was announced as a measure against the Delta-variant, which meant that people over the age of 12 would have to present proof of vaccination or a negative Covid-test performed within the last 72 h to enter certain public places, such as restaurants (Ward et al. 2022). The announcement and subsequent implementation of the Health pass was met with public outcry and demonstrations with up to 240 000 people nationwide in the late summer of 2021 (Ward et al. 2022). Many of the demonstrators in the Movement against the Health pass were former or current participants of the YVM (Saviana 2021). Nevertheless, the share of people vaccinated increased after the introduction of the Health pass, with approximately 90% of the eligible population vaccinated by December 2021.

As of yet, there is to my knowledge no published studies that explore the relationship between the YVM and attitudes to the Covid pandemic. However, Spire, Bajos and Silberzan (2021), speaking of France, state that their ‘[…] analyses showed that trust in government was the variable with the strongest effect on reluctance to vaccinate against Covid-19 […]’. Similarly, Ward et al.’s (2020) study on Covid vaccines in France found that people identifying with the far-right or the far-left or with no political affiliation were more likely to be vaccine-hesitant. These demographics were also overrepresented in the YVM (Collectif d’enquête sur les Gilets jaunes 2019). The interviewees in this article belong to this demographic, as they are either current or former supporters of the radical right or the radical left. As Ward et al. (2020) state, the vaccine hesitancy can be understood as a part of the current political crisis in France, which is what I will explore in this article. First, however, I will present my method.

2. Method

Post-political critique, and particularly the thought of Rancière, plays a key role in this article, and to explain why that is, I will have to give the context in which I began to be interested in the Movement against the Health pass. When I started interviewing YVs in early 2021, France was in lockdown, with curfew starting at 6 p.m. Questions regarding the authorities’ handling of the pandemic or issues concerning the vaccines were not initially a central part of my questionnaire but were themes that my interviewees were interested in. After the Macron-government introduced the Health pass, some of my interviewees became involved in the Movement against the Health pass, which they saw as a continuation of the YVM. I became a participative observant in these demonstrations in the fall of 2021, primarily in Toulouse and in the Parisian area.

At first glance, the Movement against the Health pass seemed even more diverse and challenging to define than the notoriously heterogeneous YVM. However, I found that my interviewees and the people I spoke to in demonstrations were united in their critique of the current political system in France, and in the experience of not being listened to. For some of my interviewees, their disillusionment with the political situation in France was
intertwined with, and framed in the language of, conspiracy theories, and I began to study how their conspiracy theories and political critique intersected. Klein and Nera (2021, 14–18) describe this approach in the following manner:

If we should fear conspiracy theories, treating it as something disgusting will not defeat it. [...]. The statistic prevalence or conspiracy theories among the groups that view themselves as ‘losers’, emphasize that mistrust in the political system is an important part of the contemporary success of conspiracy speech. The result is a vicious circle in which conspiracy theories nourish a perception of the political system, which, in its turn, nourishes conspiracy theories. [...] We wish [...] to envisage conspiracy theories as a way to connect with politics: they are nourished by the mistrust in democratic institutions and sustain this mistrust, as they delegitimize counter power. This action-reaction dynamic reinforces the polarization between ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ in liberal democracies without offering an alternative political project, as it eliminates all possibility of establishing such a project.3

As such, this article attempts to envisage how conspiracy theories can be a way of connecting to politics. In particular, I discuss how my interviewees’ critique of the French political system closely resembled the post-political critique of neoliberal society (Crouch 2004; Rancière 1999; Mouffe 2005). The similarities between a radical critique of liberal democracy and a conspiracy theory, here broadly defined as the belief that ‘[…] nothing happens by accident; nothing is as it seems; and everything is connected’ (Butter and Knight 2020, 1), have been described thoroughly in the literature (Aupers 2020, 479; Latour 2004). This article is also interested in the conjunctions between such a radical critique and conspiracy theories but explores how these two interact in the analyses of ‘ordinary people’, not political philosophers.

My approach is thus indebted to Luc Boltanski’s (2013, 48) pragmatist sociology, and its focus on ‘[…] the critical capacities of ordinary actors and [it’s] taking as the subject of empirical research those situations, abounding in ordinary life, in which actors put into play these capacities […]. This emphasis on ordinary actors is a reaction to the Bourdieusian school of sociology and ‘[…] the excessive weight placed on the delusion of the agents and the deep asymmetry between deluded actors and the clear-minded sociologist’ (Boltanski 2013, 44). In other words, I view my interviewees as actors with agency that criticize the current societal order ‘[…] almost in the style of critical sociologists’ (Boltanski 2013, 45). I believe this emphasis on the ‘folk-sociology’ of ordinary people is particularly warranted when discussing Covid-19 and vaccination, as the pandemic is a situation that particularly accentuates the interconnectedness of the micro and the macro-level of society: It was individuals that had to take the decision whether to get vaccinated or not, while societies on a macro-level depended on a high level of vaccination.

However, as Boltanski also realizes, any thorough analysis ‘[…] cannot simply stand very close to what people say and do. It is of course a requisite, a tool for analysis, but never an end in itself’ (Fabiani 2011, 405). Thus, I parallel my interviewees’ criticisms with certain key points in the post-political critique of neoliberal society, namely, 1) inequality, 2) consensual and technocratic politics and 3) the primacy of economy over politics (Crouch 2004; Mouffe 2005; Žižek 1999; Rancière 1999). This approach is
similar to what Prentoulis and Thomassen (2013, 169) describe in their article on participants in the anti-austerity demonstrations in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis:

[W]e treat the protesters as political theorists rather than as objects of a social reality. Doing so does not mean that we treat them as bearers of already established positions within contemporary political theory, for instance as Deleuzians or Lacanians. Nor do we treat them as objects whose claims are to be corroborated through the application of an already verified theory. [...] The aim is to let the protesters speak for themselves, and to treat their language as the language in which our analysis is cast.

I realize, as Prentoulis and Thomassen (2013, 169) point out, that this endeavour is both necessary and impossible. It is necessary because the YVMs, as did the anti-austerity movements, reject representation (Hayat 2021; Rosanvallon 2020). To take these movements seriously thus unavoidably implies trying to analyze their own discourse. At the same time, it is impossible to let my interviewees speak on their own terms. Prentoulis and Thomassen (2013, 169) describe this paradox in the following way, saying there is, [...] no way to avoid adding a layer of representation to the protesters’ discourse. [...] The language of interpretation and analysis can tag on to the language of the interpreted and the analysed, but the gap can never be closed; some alienation will remain.

The interviews I analyze in this article are the result of a bigger project concerned with the YVM. They are semi-structural interviews conducted in person and/or on Zoom in the spring and/or fall of 2021, and on my participant observation in the Movement against the Health pass in France in the fall of 2021. The interviews were conducted in French, and were later transcribed and translated by me. I have chosen to use only a handful of the interviews I conducted, as I believe it is more fruitful to analyze my interviewees’ responses and mental trajectories in depth than to engage with a larger amount of people. The names of my interviewees are changed, and I have removed other identifiable information from their accounts.

Let us now move on to the next part of the article, namely, a presentation of the post-political critique.

3. The post-political critique of neoliberalism

In the recent decades, prominent political theorists have developed the concept of post-politics.5 Inspired by the fall of the Soviet Union and the development of Francis Fukuyama’s ‘end of politics’ paradigm, these scholars argue that current Western democracies are characterized by technocratic, managerial and consensual practices, rather than dissensus and contestation that render political divides visible (Crouch 2004; Mouffe 2005; Rancière 1999; Rancière 2009; Rancière 2021). While the building of the welfare state in the aftermath of the Second World War gave politics primacy over the economy, the situation became reversed during the 1970s and 80s. The ascendance of neoliberalism meant that ‘[…] a gradual shift away from popular dispute towards an increasingly
consensus-oriented form of decision-making – subordinate to market logics – has developed’ (Farkas and Schou 2019, 122). Although these scholars differ on many points, they share the view of society as fundamentally contingent, that is to say, without an ultimate foundation (Marchart 2008). Moreover, many of them make a distinction between politics and the political (Chambers 2011; Wiley 2016; Marchart 2008). As Swyngedouw and Wilson (2014, 6) write,

The precise meaning of these terms is highly contested. Broadly speaking, however, they all refer to a situation in which the political – understood as a space of contestation and agonistic engagement – is increasingly colonised by politics – understood as technocratic mechanisms and consensual procedures that operate within an unquestioned framework of representative democracy, free market economics, and cosmopolitan liberalism.

3.1. Inequality

One of the main claims of post-political critique is that egalitarian and redistributive politics has become less important in contemporary Western society than it was during the trente glorieuses after the Second World War. This development has been in tandem with the pacification and consensualization of politics (Rancière 1999; Mouffe 2005; Crouch 2004). Colin Crouch (2004, 6) describes this development in the following manner:

My central contentions are that, while the forms of democracy remains fully in place – and today in some respects are actually strengthened – politics and government are increasingly slipping back into the control of privileged elites in the manner characteristic of pre-democratic times; and that one major consequence of this process is the growing impotence of egalitarian causes.

Similarly, Chantal Mouffe (2005, 60) criticizes proponents of the ‘third way’ politics, that is to say those who claim that the left/right cleavage has become irrelevant, for claiming to want to reinvigorate social democracy, while in reality accepting the premises of neoliberal capitalism:

[…] it is clear that this supposed renewal consists in making the social democratic project basically resign itself to accepting the present stage of capitalism. That is a drastic move since the aim of social democracy has always been to confront the systemic problems of inequality and instability engendered by capitalism.

One of the consequences of this development, Mouffe argues, is a rise in inequality, as the state’s primary task is no longer redistribution or public services, as these tasks are ‘[…] subordinated to the neoliberal agenda of setting the corporate economy free of the regulations that previous social democratic governments had installed to control capitalism’ (Mouffe 2005, 61). Mouffe’s criticism is particularly aimed at left parties that have embraced this new paradigm, which leads me to a second central argument of the post-political critique, namely, that politics is becoming increasingly consensual.
3.2. Consensual politics

A second claim of the post-political critique, and perhaps its most well-known, is that the political sphere is becoming increasingly consensual, that is to say, that political discord is replaced with technocratic governmentality. Rancière argues that consensus democracy imitates conflict and true politics, while in reality being a competition between interchangeable elites (Rancière 2021, 3; Rancière 1999, 102). Similarly, Mouffe (2005, 16–17) argues that ‘the political’ is defined by a we/they divide, and criticizes the ‘end of politics’ paradigm in which ideology and the right/left-cleavage is seen as redundant (2005, 2), and where agonistic adversaries no longer fights for hegemony (2005, 21). She claims that the repression of the agonistic dimension of politics results in a ‘[…] return of the repressed, in the form of right-wing nationalisms and religious fundamentalisms, which give expression to the antagonism that has been eviscerated from the domain of democratic contestation’ (Swyngedouw and Wilson 2014, 22). This analysis is similar to Slavoj Žižek’s (2006), who argues that ‘the passion for the excluding One’ rises as a result of the post-political order. When internal discord – politics – is repressed, it will replaced by the threat of an external enemy, he claims:

[p]ost-politics mobilizes the vast apparatus of experts, social workers, and so on, to reduce the overall demand (complaint) of a particular group to just this demand, with its particular content – no wonder that this suffocating closure gives birth to ‘irrational’ outbursts of violence as the only way to give expression to the dimension beyond particularity. (Žižek 1999, 204)

For Žižek, as for Rancière, the possibility of politics and real discord is thus a precondition for a healthy democracy. In post-democracy, on the contrary, identity politics and violent fundamentalisms reappear (Swyngedouw and Wilson 2014, 13; Rancière 1999, 124–25). The result is ‘[…] fragmented, inarticulate eruption[s] of the demand for equality’ (Swyngedouw and Wilson 2014, 13).

3.3. Economy’s primacy over politics

As seen in the sections regarding inequality and consensual politics, a third claim of the post-political critique is that ‘[…] the political is reduced to the economic […]’ (Swyngedouw and Wilson 2014, 20), as neoliberal policies explicitly are built on and for the safeguarding and prosperity of the economy (Rancière 1999; Crouch 2004). Politicians act on what they deem to be the economic necessities of the market:

From an allegedly defunct Marxism, the supposedly reigning liberalism borrows the theme of objective necessity, identified with the constraints and caprices of the world market. Marx’s once scandalous thesis that governments are simple business agents for international capital is today the obvious fact on which ‘liberals’ and ‘socialists’ agree. The absolute identification of politics with the management of capital is no longer the shameful secret hidden behind the
forms’ of democracy; it is the openly declared truth by which our governments acquire legitimacy. (Rancière 1999: 113)

In many countries, this development became particularly clear after the financial crisis of 2008, where large banks and businesses were largely bailed out, while the population at large was subjected to austerity measures (Swyngedouw and Wilson 2014, 19). Furthermore, the financial crisis showcased national governments impotence vis-à-vis large, multinational businesses.

3.4. Dissent

A common thread in the post-political critique sketched out in the above is the claim that the post-political climate makes dissent difficult, as politics is primarily a task for interchangeable elites that fundamentally agree that the main role of the state is to safeguard the economy. In this climate, dissent is difficult to express. In this way, the post-political critique also targets the way in which politics is becoming more and more a task for the elites, while citizens become more passive (Crouch 2004). Nevertheless, dissent can occur, and among the post-political theorists, Rancière’s theory of subjectification is particularly pertinent for the case of the YVM conspiracy theorists.

Rancière’s political theory is a theory of equality, which takes the fundamental belief that all humans are equal as its point of departure. Politics, in what Rancière believes to be its only true sense, only occurs when the part of those who have no part (sans-parts), that is to say, those who ‘do not count’ and hold no power in the political system, declare that they are equal to those in power, and therefore that the current political system is aleatory: ‘Politics exists when the natural order of domination is interrupted by the institution of a part of those who have no part’ (1999, 11). Politics is thus happening in the rare occurrences when the part of those who have no part realize the discrepancy between what the social order claims to be, and what it is (2021, 45–47).

Politics, in its proper sense, is thus here defined as a coup de grâce, in which the part with no part realizes and declares themselves equal to those who govern them. It is the moment in which the dominated sees the discrepancy between what they are being told, that they are equal, and the reality, that they are not treated as such. This realization is called subjectification in Rancière’s thought (1999, 36).

The intersections between post-political critique, subjectification and conspiracy theories will be discussed further in the next sections of this article. First, however, I will briefly introduce the academic literature on the culture and structure of conspiracy theories, and how conspiracy theories are interpreted within sociology and political science.

4. Conspiracy theories

As mentioned in the above, conspiracy theories is here defined broadly as the belief that ‘[...] nothing happens by accident; nothing is as it seems; and everything is connected’ (Butter and Knight 2020, 1). In his book on conspiracy culture, Barkun (2013, 6)
distinguishes between different scopes of conspiracy theories. There are event conspiracies, in which the ‘[…] conspiracy theory is held to be responsible for a limited, discrete event or set of events […]’, such as the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. But there are also systemic conspiracies, in which ‘[…] the conspiracy is believed to have broad goals, usually conceived as securing control over a country, a region, or even the entire world. While the goals are sweeping, the conspiratorial machinery is generally simple: a single, evil organization implements a plan to infiltrate and subvert existing institutions’. Jews, Masons, the Catholic Church and international capitalists have often been named as these ‘evil organisations’. Finally, there are superconspiracies, in which ‘[…] multiple conspiracies are believed to be linked together hierarchically’.

Conspiracy theories are often eclectic and contradictory, mixing religious belief, myths and secular ideologies (Barkun 2013, 16). In many systemic conspiracies or superconspiracies, the notions of an ‘end time’ and the domination of a ‘New World Order’ figure (Barkun 2013, 40). The notion of a New World Order is a component in countless conspiracy theories, with some conspiracy theorists naming freemasons, Jews and the Illuminati as agents of such an order (McConnachie 2013, 148; Aupers 2020, 475). The conspiracy theory of a New World Order has several traits in common with antisemitic conspiracy theories, and generally claims that ‘[…] a group or groups are seeking to establish a single, all-powerful global government’ (McConnachie 2013, 148). The conspiracy of Q-Anon and ‘Big Pharma’ also contain elements of the New World Order-narrative (Blaskiewicz 2013; Bracewell 2021). As conspiracy theories are so eclectic, the different elements of a specific theory can easily be put together in different ways: ‘The bricolage required by the improvisational style permits anyone to try his or her hand at rearranging the blocks, so that, like Legos, they may be combined into new structures’ (Barkun 2013, 234). Conspiracy theories’ eclectic nature will become evident in the accounts of my interviewees.

Political science scholars have pointed out that there exist significant similarities between conspiracy theories and populism, as both phenomena are built on Manichean anti-elite discourses (Bergmann 2018, 169). Similarly, building on an extensive data set from the US, Uscinski and Parent (2014, 20) argue that conspiracy theories are ‘for losers’, that is to say, groups that are continually out of power or feel disenfranchised, particularly over a longer period of time:

Being out of power fuels feelings of anxiety and loss of control, which fans the flames for predisposed people to talk about or otherwise act on perceived conspiracies. Although this is most visible in the country’s partisan and ideological divisions, we also expect third parties, social movements, and fringe groups to disproportionately convey conspiratorial beliefs for the same reason: they are out of power.

In the next section of this article, I explore how my interviewees’ accounts mirror the post-political critique. In particular, I investigate what role conspiracy theories play in their political dissent, while focussing on Rancière’s notions of true politics and subjectification.
5. Voices of discontent: Four participants of the YVM on politics, Covid-19 and vaccination

5.1. Victor

Victor is a retiree in his 60s who has been self-employed for most of his life. He was active in the YVM and is now engaged in the movement against the Health pass. Previously, he was engaged in the Parti communiste français, now he is an adherent to La France Insoumise on the radical left. To him, the YVM started on the 29th of May 2005, when France held a referendum on the ratification of a constitution for the European Union. 55% of voters opted for ‘no’, with a turnout of 69%. In his presidential campaign to the 2007-election, however, Nicolas Sarkozy pledged a ratification without a referendum, and the Lisbon treaty, which was the next version of the text the French had rejected in 2005, got implemented by the Parliament.

Victor believes Sarkozy’s actions triggered the YVM:

Sarkozy, who was just condemned to prison, which is awesome, he did it, and I ask myself, and I think ‘why did we vote when they did not take our vote into account’. I think, to go back, I think that is the first element. So, people, in a democracy, when they don’t take our vote into account, there is a problem.

The second thing that made the YVM emerge, according to Victor, is the police search in the offices of La France Insoumise, that took place during an investigation into alleged misuse of funds in the fall of 2018 (AFP 2018). Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the leader of La France Insoumise, had obtained 20%, 7 million votes, remarkably good for a radical left-candidate, in the 2017-presidential election (Ministère de l’Intérieur 2017).

And on the 17th of November, one month after the search, the YVM was born, which originated in fuel prizes, and also the frustration of people, we go and vote in referendums and they do not take our vote into account, and [when] 7 million people who vote for an alternative different from what they want, they call the police.

The ‘they’ Victor refers to is key to understand his thinking. He believes there is a connection between the referendum in 2005, the police search of La France Insoumise, the YVM and Covid-19:

Those who hold the strings of the planet these last years, and the lockdown, even more now this is the case, it is a tool of subjugation, it has actually happened, and there exist people that have above all wanted a tool to oppress the people of the entire planet.

When I ask him who these people are, he taps into a conspiracy theory, namely, that he believes the Catholic Church created the HIV-epidemic in the 1980s as a ‘bacteriological weapon of mass destruction’. The belief that the HIV-virus is fabricated has been a fairly widespread conspiracy theory ever since the virus was identified in
1982 (McConnachie 2013, 245). Conspiracy theorists have attributed the creation of the HIV to different institutions, such as the CIA, the Apartheid regime in South Africa and the state of Israel (Nattrass 2012, 16). Now, Victor believes, the same is happening with Covid, in what is an antisemitic conspiracy theory. Antisemitic conspiracy theories have long historical roots in France (Winock 1998), and a study from the European Commission shows a rise in antisemitic discourse both online in France and Germany in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, with conspiracy theorists claiming Covid-19 to be a Jewish plot (European Commission 2021). Victor thinks that Covid-19 is a

[...] mass-euthanasia of old people, and it’s very serious, the victims of the Holocaust in the Second World War become the fatties of today, and there, I am at a breaking point that is always delicately in between antizionism and anti-semitism.

Victor believes that the elderly are killed because they are too expensive.

They work too little, they are retired, that’s what the capitalists think, they’re worth nothing, so we will eliminate them. When you see things like that, it’s like the energy of the last war, no kidding.

We see here how Victor uses antisemitic conspiracy theories to explain Covid-19, something he later develops on. Victor believes that the HIV-virus was fabricated at the Pasteur Institute and thereafter spread around the world, and that the Catholic Church was helped in this maneuver by Laurent Fabius, from the Parti socialiste, who was prime minister from 1984 to 1986, and in 2022 is the president of France’s Constitutional Counsel. Now, Victor suggests, Laurent Fabius is involved in the spreading of the Covid-19-virus:

And where is he now, Laurent Fabius? [...] He is the president of the Constitutional Counsel. Do you see how these things are repeating themselves?

But Victor believes politicians like Fabius or Macron are working for other and bigger forces, namely, the monotheistic religions. While he thinks the Catholic Church was behind the HIV, he believes Jews are behind Covid-19:

The monotheistic religions need a justification for their religions, and that is the first attack on the consciousness. [...] When one requests masques, vaccines, Covid-passes, it is not to protect us, but to kneel for certain religions. [...] What surprises me the most is that the descendants of those that suffered the Holocaust, they are controlling everything.

Victor states that he is not sceptical of vaccination in general, and that he believes that vaccines are a part of humanity’s progress. But he has not taken the Covid vaccine, because he is ‘a rebel on all levels’, and believes taking the vaccine is to submit to
Macron’s power. Victor gives an account of a conspiracy theory that connects the Health pass to the presidential election in 2022.

They already talk of [prolonging the pass] until July next year (i.e. 2022), and why, the presidential election, so why, if you have the pass, and to access the voting booths you need the pass, if you are not vaccinated, you cannot vote.6 […] It is there to subjugate people. […] What people haven’t understood is that there is not one type of fascism in France, there are two. You have the historical fascism, that is to say Le Pen, connected to the Second World War, and you have the fascism of what I will call the Zionists, of Macron, of those who hold the strings, […] and it’s a submission-thing, and to refer to what happens in Israel, it’s apartheid. […] We have a social apartheid, between rich and poor, between vaccinated and non-vaccinated.

Victor’s account is characterized by a number of conspiracy theories, but equally with the frustration with a political system that he feels does not listen to him. When he tried to get his opinion through in the 2005-referendum, the result was overturned, and when he voted for Mélenchon in 2017, the high electoral score did not result in political influence due to the French electoral system. In this way, Victor exemplifies what Uscinski and Parent write, namely, that conspiracy theories are ‘for losers’, groups that are durably disenfranchised politically. Moreover, Victor’s often conspiratorial claims intersect with much of the post-political critique, although they are framed in the language of conspiracy: He believes that there exists a ‘social apartheid’ between the rich and the poor, and that the political elite ignores political protest. Furthermore, he says that politicians from different political parties, such as Macron or Le Pen, are interchangeable, as they are all ‘fascists’, parts of an elite that subjugates the poor and does not listen to dissent.

What interests me most in Victor’s account, is how the issue of vaccine and a Health pass are interconnected with his distrust in politicians. He explicitly links Sarkozy’s U-turn on the Lisbon Treaty and the police search in La France Insoumise’s offices to the YVM and to the Health pass. To him, the 2005-referendum was an example of the fact that politicians no longer listen to the people, something he believes the YVM and the Health pass are also examples of. Indeed, he believes Macron has introduced the Health pass to prevent people from voting. As I analyze it, his resistance against the Covid vaccine must be understood through this perspective, namely, the experience of not being listened to. Not to vaccinate thus becomes an act of political protest, a way of trying to make one’s voice heard, something Victor states explicitly when he says that he has not taken the vaccine because ‘he is a rebel’ and that to take the vaccine is to become submitted. As I interpret Victor, not taking the vaccine implies saying that you do not want to be a part of a political system that you believe do not listen to you. It implies, he believes, giving away your right to vote, for example, thus leaving behind the most common democratic means of voice. To use Rancière’s term, not being vaccinated implies no longer wanting to be counted, as you already believe your voice never counts anyway. generally, one can say that while the YVM gave voice to ‘the part with no part’, the Movement against the Health pass is an example of the ‘part with no part’ retracting from the social and political body.
altogether. This retraction is very concrete, as Victor no longer can be a part of important social scenes, such as restaurants.

5.2. Emma and Louise

Emma and Louise are sisters, both in their 30s, who each have families, but that remain very close. They were raised in a left-wing, but not very political home, and had never been engaged in politics before they decided to join the YVM after watching demonstrations on the news. Emma, the eldest, went to a roundabout one Saturday, which she found ‘super-nice’ and soon thereafter Louise joined her in a demonstration in the nearest métropole. The sisters were initially motivated by the question of fuel prices, but equally by the frustrations over the fact that their wages did not provide them with a satisfying living-standard. In the beginning, the sisters found the demonstrations enjoyable, but soon they became very scared of the police, as the repression of the demonstrations became more physical. This evolution surprised the sisters, Emma explains:

We were strangers, so to speak, to the life in the suburbs (banlieue), maybe to the lower classes, yes, I’ve heard since forever that in the suburbs, and I have said since the first day that they should clean up, and why aren’t they arresting all those traffickers, and afterwards, you become aware of it when you are in it and they have designated you as their enemy, it’s so legitimate, it was so new to our gullible view of France: ‘the police in France are kind, the police arrests the thieves that are bad’, or ‘the television is kind, it shows the police that arrests the bad people’.

Emma then goes on to explain how she believes the media misrepresented the events of the YVM, particularly the depiction of the YVM as violent. Louise interrupts, saying:

And that has been a problem since forever, only that we, we just started to understand that two years ago. But now, we understand a lot of things, you see, we see things very differently. Covid, you know, if that had happened three years ago…

Emma interrupts,

We would have been scared, we would have been in front of our TVs, and we would have been scared of dying.

But now, the sisters state that they live normally with their families, but that they ask themselves ‘who is behind all of it’. Emma describes their attitude in the following way:

Everyone says ‘complotiste, complotiste’, I don’t know what to call it, if you want to, ‘complotiste’, but there are always personal interests that are served to the detriment of the mass of the population, and that is on all subjects, and notably, the YVs, […] and voilà it is revealed that they have taken away twenty thousand beds in the hospital the last ten years, and now they are confining us because there aren’t enough beds, but if you reflect for one minute,
the hospitals say that this has been happening for twenty years, and in fact, all the people are opening their eyes, because there is so much chaos and they treat us like Illuminati and conspiracy theorists.

In regards to Covid, the sisters state that they are still unsure where it originates. Louise states that,

[...] there are people dying slow and lonely deaths in the four corners of the world, and that doesn’t bother people, but here, all the world is put in motion, but why, me, I still don’t have the answer.

Emma says that she wonders whether the leaders of the world and people in ‘Big Pharma’ are laughing right now, but that she does not know whether they originated the virus or not. Neither of the sisters plan on getting vaccinated. Blaskiewicz (2013, 259) writes that the Big Pharma-conspiracies constitute ‘[...] their own genre within the larger category of conspiratorial narratives’, with an imagined Pharmaceutical Industry as its enemy. Blaskiewicz states that ‘[i]n these stories, “Big Pharma” is shorthand for an abstract entity comprised of corporations, regulators, NGOs, politicians, and often physicians, all with a finger in the trillion-dollar prescription pharmaceutical pie’. Many Big Pharma-conspiracists think that ‘[...] diseases are deliberately manufactured molecule-by-molecule or weaponised in labs and released onto the populace in order to give companies an excuse to sell medications’ (Blaskiewicz 2013, 260). Studies show that Big Pharma conspiracy theories became more prevalent during the Covid pandemic (Grimes 2021).

Overall, the experiences of injustice during the YVM heavily influenced the sisters’ interpretations of the pandemic. They are highly critical not only of politicians and the media, but equally of the justice system. In particular, they mention Alexandre Benella, Macron’s former bodyguard who received a prison sentence after assaulting rioters (AFP 2021), and Gérard Darmanin, minister in Macron’s government, who in 2020 came under investigation after rape allegations were levelled against him (AFP 2020). Emma describes it in the following manner:

[...] the expeditious judgements of the YVMs, the judicial system has never [worked] so well as then, it was immediate expedition, imprisoned for a year, no more talking. And afterwards you see the Benellas you see the Darminins and stuff, and it makes you go mad, you know. Mad, mad, mad. You, you’re considered like nothing, and still there is impunity all over for the others, and you, if you obey and do what is told, you serve a country that is good [...]. And still, after the pandemic, people [will say] ‘you don’t know what a dictatorship is like, how dare you say that we are a dictatorship, we’re a democracy in France’. Yes, if you agree with everything that happens, life is good, but not if you oppose what is decided on your behalf, and that is the principle of dictatorships, anyhow.

What Emma’s account is characterized by is the experience that there are different sets of rules for different sets of people in France, and that dissent is impossible. As such,
Emma and Louise’s critique intersects with the post-political critique, in which it is claimed that ‘[...] while the forms of democracy remains fully in place – and today in some respects are actually strengthened – politics and government are increasingly slipping back into the control of privileged elites in the manner characteristic of pre-democratic times […]’ (Crouch 2004, 6).

Equally, Emma and Louise’s accounts mirror post-political critique of consensual politics. Emma and Louise describe it as though they stayed in place before the YVM, and that everything was good as long as they stayed there. They were dutiful, normal citizens that paid taxes, followed rules and trusted the media and the government. The problems arose only when they tried stopped agreeing with the status quo, and began protesting. The sisters’ reflections on the confusion they felt after the YVM is very interesting, as it demonstrates how they began to question everything they had been told before. Specifically, they state that they would have followed government guidelines, had it not been for the YVM. Now, they believe that France is a country where the rich get away with everything, while the poor are chastised for nothing. Moreover, they have begun to engage in conspiratorial thinking and started questioning whether someone profits on the pandemic. This rapid development is also an example of what Uscinski and Parent write when they state that conspiracy theories are ‘for losers’.

Moreover, Emma and Louise describe what Rancière calls subjectification. When the sisters joined the YVM, they did so with the presupposition that they would be treated decently, as equal citizens. But they quickly experienced that this was not so, and began to question what happens in France’s banlieues, something they had never done before. As I interpret it, the sisters now see the discrepancy between what they have been told, namely, that they are equal, and the reality, namely, that they are not treated as such, everywhere. It is this realization that Rancière calls subjectification. To follow Rancière, the sisters have discovered true politics. But Emma and Louise also exemplify what happens after the moment of subjectification. It is in this context of disappointment that Emma and Louise have been drawn to conspiracy theories regarding Covid, as they try to understand why their voices were not listened to. When politicians do not listen to what the people have to say, one explanation might be that the politicians are not really in charge, Emma and Louise’s logic goes. This interpretation was quite widespread among YVs I met that had never been a part of a political movement before the YVM. While YVs that had been engaged in left-wing politics tended to interpret the failing of the YVM through a quasi-Marxist framework, the previously apolitical YVs were more disappointed, and more prone to conspiracy thinking.

The experiences in the YVM have profoundly changed the sisters’ worldviews. Louise and her husband have quit their jobs and moved to a farm on the countryside to live off the land. Emma is contemplating doing something similar. Louise does not plan to vote in coming elections, while Emma is planning on voting Mélenchon, although reluctantly. In this way, the sisters exemplify something similar to what we saw in Victor’s account, namely, the tendency to withdraw from society.
5.3. Mathias

Mathias is a self-employed man in his 40s, who has previously voted for the Rassemblement National, but who had never been politically active before the YVM in 2018. He says that the idea of rising fuel prices is what drew him to the YVM, as he finds himself in a very precarious economic situation. Moreover, he was fed-up with politicians, and the form of government France has had for ‘fifty years, since Mitterrand, since the left has been in power here, it’s total abandon, it is a catastrophe […]’. Now, he is a member of one of the political parties that sprung out of the YVM, namely, the Evolution Citoyenne, which is a small, radical right party that emerged from the YVM (L’Express and AFP 2019).

Mathias wants to change the French political system, introducing referendums where ‘the French people will vote their own laws, which will direct their own political line. We will not need a president or a minister to direct us’. Therefore, Mathias wants to,

dissolve the government and the National Assembly, they will no longer be there, because we will put in place a transitional power structure led by a general of the army in the transition period.

Then, he, and the Evolution Citoyenne, will put in place a new assembly, where no deputies will be former politicians, and where representatives will only be able to cast votes according to the will of the people in the department they represent.

Mathias believes all the current politicians are basically the same:

They are all rotten. […] In the sense that it is all a big piece the theater, one should know that Mélencion, Marine Le Pen, Macron, they all dine at the same table, they even have each other’s telephone numbers, they call each other. And on TV and in the National Assembly, they make believe that there are opposing political parties, but it is false, all of that is orchestrated, it’s a big piece of theater, all of that has been stringing together for years, it’s not only since Macron, it’s for years.

Mathias believes all politics is a lie. Quite tellingly, he also proposes extreme measures to sanction these politicians, as he says he wants to put them on trial:

All the people who are in positions today, we will judge them for what they have done against the French people. Because one should know that today there are terrorist acts committed against the French people. […] It will be a popular judgement. It is the people that will judge whether they are going to prison or if they will be handed over to the guillotine.

Mathias states that he ‘will never take the vaccine’ as he believes that it is impossible to create an effective vaccine in such a short time. In regards to Covid-19 more generally, Mathias believes it is a scam, and that is imposed to curtail the civic liberties of the French people, which is why he wants to change the political system in France.
You see, all of my people are very unhappy today, and are very scared, because they are so beaten, they have to leave demonstrations because, from the moment we put on vests, because from the moment you are contesting in France, you are conspiratorial, you are beaten, arrested, put in custody, sentenced, etc. So this is the evidence of this notorious dictatorship that is in the process of being implemented in France thanks to this notorious sanitary crisis. Me, I am very close to my people, but I believe all politicians are scoundrels.

Here, we see how Mathias explicitly relates the YVM to the handling of the Covid-19 pandemic. Specifically, we see how he links the police and judicial system’s handling of the YVM’s demonstrations, which has been harsher and more violent than any other social movement in France since 1968, to the lockdown measures. Mathias believes that Covid-19 was fabricated. He relates that the Pasteur Institute made the SARS-virus (SARS-Cov1) in 2002–2003, and that it has fabricated the Covid-virus (SARS-Cov2) too:

That a pangolin dies, and that somehow a bat finds that pangolin, and for a hunter to find the carcass of the pangolin and that this carcass then is found in a market, well, I think people are complete idiots.

‘But why would the Pasteur Institute fabricate the virus in your opinion? Is it Macron or someone else, who is it?’ I then ask him.

No, Macron is only a pawn, today, all the leaders in all the countries are only pawns. They are only there so that they can say to them ‘do this, do that’. Today, who rules, who begin to want to rule the entire world, it’s not only countries, it’s the entire world, what we call the global order, to take over the global order, they no longer hide, they say they want to create a world order, who is hidden behind that world order, they no longer hide. Today you have the Bill Gates and the Rothschilds, all the multi-billionaires, they are the ones that want to rule. That is to say, today, in all the countries, it is they that buy everything, the media, they are implicated in everything, in the pharmaceuticals, in all of it, in the laboratories. There is a reason behind it all.

As mentioned in the above, the notion of a New World Order is a component in countless conspiracy theories, with some conspiracy theorists naming freemasons, Jews and the Illuminati as agents of such an order (McConnachie 2013, 148; Aupers 2020, 475). Even though Mathias stays relatively wage as to who constitutes this New World Order, he specifically mentions Bill Gates, which connects him to the conspiracy theory regarding 5G (Bruns, Harrington, and Hurcombe 2020), and the Rothschilds, which connects him to antisemitism (Allington, Buarque, and Barker Flores 2021). Several 5G conspiracy theories emerged in the wake of Covid-19, with some conspiracy theorists believing the pandemic to be a diversion for the government to put up 5G towers who subsequently would control or kill people, and others that Bill Gates spread the vaccine through 5G towers to then make a profit of vaccines, which contain microchips that control people. Finally, some conspiracy theorists believe 5G creates Covid-like symptoms, but that these are fake (Sturm and Albrecht 2021).
After unfolding what he believes to be the forces behind the pandemic, Mathias then goes on to describe how media speaks of Covid-19 to divert people from the fact that all politicians are paedophiles, a conspiracy theory that became particularly prevalent during Donald Trump’s presidency due to the internet-based Q-Anon movement. Bracewell (2021, 2) summarize Q-Anon in the following manner: ‘Q-Anon is an umbrella term for a baroque set of conspiracy theories alleging without evidence that the world is controlled by a secret cabal of Satan-worshipping paedophiles who are abducting, abusing, and ritualistically murdering children by the thousands’.

There is one element I would like to point out from Mathias’s account of the Covid-19 pandemic, namely, how he views the pandemic through the same logic that he viewed the emergence of the YVM. It appears that there is no way for him to interpret the pandemic but through the experiences he had during the pandemic, namely, that the politicians and the state wish to curtail the demonstrations of the YVM. One element that interests me in Mathias’s account is the description of politics as a theatre. Mathias taps into a series of well-trodden conspiracy theories to explain Covid-19. He describes it as though there are no real political conflicts between the political parties, and that they all just pretend to disagree, which can be seen as a conspiratorial version of post-politics’ critique of consensual politics. We notice that Mathias does not differentiate between different political figures, which distinguishes him from certain populist voters that may say that all politicians are corrupt, except their candidate. To Mathias, however, even Marine Le Pen is playing a game and is to be considered a part of the establishment. Moreover, we see that Mathias does not criticize the politicians because of what they are saying or doing per se, but because he believes everything they are saying or doing is unreal, a scam. This belief exemplifies another level of political mistrust, a kind of mistrust that is especially difficult to counter, as it cannot be solved by the appearance of one candidate, a new party or political discussions.

6. Discussion

What becomes apparent in my interviewees’ accounts is how their views on politics shape their views on Covid and vaccination. They see France as a place in which there is a big difference between rich and poor, in which politicians are interchangeable, and where dissent is difficult. While Victor has held these opinions for a long time, since Sarkozy’s U-turn after the 2005-referendum, Emma, Louise and Mathias acquired them after their involvement in the YVM.

If we look closer at the interviewees’ criticisms, we see that they point to developments that we find in post-political critique. One such development is the changing attitudes to social inequality (Crouch 2004, 6). For example, Rancière argues (2009, 28) that the French school system no longer tries to decrease social inequality, but instead blames students for being ‘[…] democratic consumer[s] drunk on equality […]’:

Indeed, the denunciation of ‘democratic individualism’ works, at little cost, to make coincide these two theses: the classic thesis of property-owners (the poor always want more), and the
thesis of refined elites – there are too many individuals, too many people claiming the privileges of individuality. […] The issue yesterday concerned transmitting the universality of knowledge and its egalitarian power. What it comes down to transmitting today, […] is simply the principle of birth, the principle of sexual division and of kinship. (Rancière 2009, 28–30)

As I interpret it through Rancière, this is the logic Emma and Louise criticize when they state that the inhabitants of the banlieues and participants of the YVM are receiving harsher treatment by the police than Alexandre Benella or Gérard Darmanin. They are identifying the gap between the equality they are being told that they possess and the inequality that they in fact live with. Similarly, although their accounts are clouded by conspiracy theories, Victor and Mathias describe a society in which the gap between the rich and the poor is widening, a development they believe is supported by the political elite.

The post-political critique of consensual politics can be found in my interviewees’ criticism of what they deem to be interchangeable political leaders, none of whom they believe really propose fundamental political change. The notion of consensual politics is particularly interesting when discussing Covid-19, as the handling of the pandemic, more than most political issues in France, has been subject to consensual, technocratic and scientific practices, particularly in the government’s discourse. Tanke (2011, 46) writes on Rancière’s notion of the post-political order that “[i]t frequently exploits the cover of political realism, the doctrine that justifies war, social hierarchies, and economic inequalities by invoking necessity”.

The notion of political realism, of the inevitable, has been particularly prevalent during the pandemic, as the issues of lockdowns, curfews, masks and vaccines were presented as the only possible way to go. When my interviewees criticize harsh lockdown measures and the politics of vaccination, it is thus possible to interpret it as a criticism of consensual politics. The interviewees’ experience of such a political consensus becomes evident in their responses as they describe how difficult they find it to raise this criticism. One example is when Emma says that she is being called a conspiracy theorist when she questions the reduction in hospital beds in recent years. Another is Mathias who says that ‘[…] from the moment you are contesting in France, you are conspiratorial’. In this context, refusing to get vaccinated might be interpreted as the most radical way of dissenting to a consensual police order, thus proclaiming that there are other possible ways of being, ways of living.

In all of the interviewees’ accounts, although it is particularly prevalent in those of Victor and Mathias, the frustration with the political state in France and experience of not being listened to seems to have opened the door to conspiracy thinking. Victor, Emma, Louise and Mathias all talk about events where the government has ignored the will of the people or treated groups of the population in a degrading manner. When the interviewees tried to object to these developments in the YVM, they were met with an aggressive response by the Authorities. Through a Ranciéréian reading, one might say that they presumed their equality to other citizens of France, but got a final proof of their ultimate and permanent inequality. In this context, it is understandable that my interviewees begin to form a metapolitical view of the state. When the Authorities do not listen to the citizens
they are elected by, and whose welfare should be their primary concern, the scorned citizens begin to question the motive for this neglect. When the interviewees claim that economic concerns were sometimes prioritized over the welfare of the people during the handling of the pandemic, this interpretation is not conspiratorial per se. As seen in the above, the emphasis put on safeguarding the economy is criticized by post-political scholars, among others. But, as I mentioned in the above, there is a fine line between a radical critique of liberal democracy and paranoic conspiratorial thinking (Aupers 2020, 479). Rancière argues that when the possibility of dissent is diminished, it is replaced by other conflicts:

Where the social principle of division, the war between rich and poor, is pronounced dead and buried, we see the rise of the passion for the excluding One. Politics thus finds itself facing an even more radical split, born neither of differences in wealth nor of the struggle for office, but rather of a particular passion for unity, a passion fed by the rallying power of hatred. (Rancière and Heron 2021, 23)

When the possibilities of social discord disappear, which is the experience my interviewees had after the YVM, the need for an external enemy, the Other, appears (Žižek 2006). Žižek argues that in the post-political climate, internal discord – politics – is replaced by the threat of an external enemy. The possibility of politics and real discord is a precondition for a healthy democracy also for Rancière. In a post-political climate, on the contrary, identity politics and violent fundamentalisms reappear (Swyngedouw and Wilson 2014, 13; Rancière 1999, 124–25). The result is ‘[…] fragmented, inarticulate eruption[s] of the demand for equality’ (Swyngedouw and Wilson 2014, 13).

This is one way of interpreting the conspiratorial thinking of Victor and Mathias and the conspiratorial tendencies of Emma and Louise: They have tried to declare their equality to everyone, subjectification, in the YVM, but failed. Not to get vaccinated and to engage in conspiracy thinking is a new way to declare, to perform, this equality. With this non-action, they have made the ‘the mad presupposition that anyone is as intelligent as anyone else, and that at least one more thing can be done other than what is being done’, as Rancière (2010, 2) describes it. Schreven (2018, 1474) explains this in the following manner:

[…] in speaking up and in dissenting from the official and authorized truth, presuppose that they too can know, in addition to professionally trained knowers. Conspiracy theorists are people who take the liberty to speak, who presuppose and are confident that they are as equal to the task of knowledge production as professionally trained knowers, equally positioned to know and find out for themselves.

By not getting vaccinated, my interviewees, as briefly mentioned in the above, largely exclude themselves from society. When their voices are not being counted, they now make a choice to exclude themselves from society. But inversely, their actions can be interpreted as the opposite, as a way of insisting on their role as equal citizens. If there is one thing that has been counted in both government offices and newspapers during the
pandemic, it is the numbers of unvaccinated. In a pandemic, a nation is depended on a majority of people getting vaccinated, whatever place they hold in the social hierarchy, as the virus affects everyone, regardless of social status. In the handling of the pandemic through a vaccine, all citizens are equally important. By not getting vaccinated, my interviewees emphasize this, saying ‘you are still depended on us as members of society, even though you never care about us when we need anything’ but equally that ‘we no longer wish to be a part of your society’. As such, they declare their equality to each and every one, in what Rancière defines as politics.

This declaration is not something that can be negotiated; it is a question of dignity. Rancière (2019) described this in the following manner when commenting on the YVM in 2018:

The speech of journalists is centered on the public scene of ‘giving voice to’, which is again connected to the scene of governmental negotiations. So [the journalist] asks ‘how much before you leave the roundabout?’ But I would say that that is an absurd question, in my opinion, and what more, the response is very well ‘it can’t be put a number on’. The question of equality, of inequality, cannot be put a number on, and of course, our governments follow a logic: ‘There are social partners, we discuss with them, things work out, we see what must be given to these ones, what must be given to the others’. That is the governmental logic, […] And the response on which one falls, and which is completely evident, that is that we are no longer in the quantifiable, we are no longer in the negotiable. We can say that there is politics from the moment where there is something that is non-negotiable, […] and it is not simply an affair of how many euros we should put to that side or the other.

This element of the non-negotiable, of the wanting to be seen and heard and remembered, is also present in the Movement against the Health pass. My interviewees are thus willing to risk their health and to put important part of their social lives on hold, to perform their protest and claim to equality. In this context, just like Rancière argues in the case of the YVM, the government can put in place as many sanctions against the unvaccinated as they want, without it changing my interviewees’ mind. The conspiracy theories and refusal to get vaccinated have become means to raise discord, a means of Rancière’s true politics.

7. Conclusion

This article has investigated how four YVs’ criticism of the handling of the pandemic, the vaccine and the Health pass mirrors the post-political critique of contemporary politics. In particular, I have employed Rancière’s theory of politics and subjectification to analyze how conspiracy theories function as a means of dissent in my interviewees’ accounts. Thus, this article analyzes how the interviewees’ critique of and mistrust in the current political system shaped their views on Covid-19 generally, and on vaccines and the Health pass more specifically. The interviewees’ engagement with conspiracy theories, as well as their refusal to get vaccinated, can be interpreted as acts of defiance, as a way of declaring
to the world that their views are as good as anyone else’s, thus engaging in what Rancière characterizes as true politics.

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Notes

1. This is not to say that all participants in the Movement against the Health pass are vaccine-hesitant. Nevertheless, many participants of the Movement against the Health pass were vaccine-hesitant, and it is therefore natural to speak of these phenomena as linked (Gayet 2021).
2. In French, *Gilets Jaunes*, Yellow Vests, can refer to both the Yellow Vest Movement and individual Yellow Vests. In this article, I use the abbreviation YVM, the Yellow Vest Movement, when speaking of the movement as a whole, and YV, Yellow Vest, when speaking of individual Yellow Vests.
3. If no further details are given, all translations from French to English are done by me.
4. This project has been approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (ref. number 657532). All interviewees signed informed consent forms.
5. The terms these scholars use to name the post-democratic order, vary, with some using the terms post-democracy (Crouch 2004), others post-politics (Swyngedouw and Wilson 2014) and Rancière (Rancière 1999) depoliticization, but also post-democracy.
6. Contrary to what Victor states, the Senate excluded political, unionist and religious meetings from the list of places where it is obligatory to demonstrate a Covid-pass, and even specified that the Covid-pass is not needed to access a voting booth (Boireau 2021).
7. There has in fact been closed tens of thousands of hospital beds in France during the last years (Roche Saint-André 2021).

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