Populist Things

A Study on the Materiality of Political Ideas

Filipe Carreira da Silva

Julius Rogenhofer

Abstract

Is there such thing as a populist thing? This article tries to answer this question by comparing two iconic populist objects: the *Make America Great Again* (MAGA) cap and the yellow vest. Despite their centrality to populist politics, there is remarkably little systematic examination of these objects' populist affordances, let alone a comparative study. We propose to address this lacuna by performing a pragmatic analysis of each object's role in the populist politics of the United States and France, respectively. Our comparison uncovers two findings, which, in turn, help us answer our research question. First, our study of the MAGA cap reveals how nationalism and populism can be combined into a powerful political message. Second, the yellow vest exemplifies how populism functions on its own i.e., as a way of doing politics that is centred on feelings of resentment. Either in conjunction with other political phenomena (e.g., nationalism) or by itself, populism emerges from our analysis as a logic of action that involves both linguistic claims and physical objects. Things, in this reading, are surprisingly central to how populism operates.

Keywords

Populism; materiality; material culture; pragmatism; yellow vest; MAGA cap

1. Introduction. More than words

This article asks: What is the role of things in populism? This question matters for two reasons. First, populism is both one of the defining political phenomena of our time and one of the least understood. Second, even though material cultural studies are an important part of the social sciences toolkit, it is rarely drawn upon by populism scholars. In this exploratory study, we combine these two research programmes. Populism is understood here as something that can be done not only through words but also through or by things. This emphasis on objects and practices allows us to challenge some of the assumptions prevalent within the populism literature, the most important of which is that populist ideas are free floating i.e., independent of material culture (see, for instance, Laclau 2005). Taking two very different mobile material objects as case studies, the red MAGA caps worn by devotees of Donald Trump and the fluorescent vests worn by the French yellow vest protesters, this article zooms in on the material dimension of populist politics.

These two pieces of apparel enable and constrain the agents who wear them and, consequently, embody a populist way of doing politics. More than mere representations of populism – the notion of representation implies a dualism between material things and the realm of ideas and beliefs – each object *is* populism. But how do seemingly ordinary objects become populism? Here, in short, is the pragmatic view: emblems (from the Latin *emblema,* or "inlaid work") of populism, worn in the right social setting, become indistinguishable from the ideas and phenomena they represent. While undeniably symbolic, collective ritual practice transforms these otherwise mundane items into populist icons. The signified collapses into the material, tangible surface of objects. The meaning or idea expressed by an object is no longer distinct from its physical form. In our study, we identify the collective social agents involved in this cultural work and address the technological affordances of each material entity.

Our choice of emblematic objects is justified for at least two reasons. First, they allow us to examine how populism can be articulated with other political phenomena (nationalism, in the case of the MAGA cap), or can resist such articulation (the yellow vest). Second, the wearability and ubiquity of these objects illustrates how objects wield agency, with and through their interaction with social actors, to influence the substance of populism. Moreover, despite the consensus regarding their emblematic status and political significance, the literature on the MAGA cap and the yellow vest is relatively thin, almost no work has been done to directly compare the two artefacts.

The importance of things, and the ways in which we relate to them, is increasingly recognised by social scientists, most notably through the so-called ontological turn and the emergence of "new materialisms" (see, for instance, Blok and Jensen 2019). Yet, these approaches are often associated with a flat ontology, in which any hierarchy of entities is rejected, and all objects are assigned the same importance. We consider this horizontalism to be problematic for at least two reasons: First, the conceptualisation of human agency in these accounts is often limited. Instead of attempting to enrich our understanding of human agency, attention is diverted away from the human species to non-human beings or things. Second, much of this literature reifies rather than problematises things and our dealings with them. A simple return to the idealisms and materialisms of old is, of course, out of the question. A more promising alternative, we believe, is American philosophical pragmatism. Pragmatic thinkers, namely C.S. Peirce and G.H. Mead, are unique in their systematic exploration of the interplay between human and non-human agency. From this perspective, things matter but they are not reified. New attention to things-as-things is necessary, but things require human agents to function as things, a fact that is particularly pertinent when the interplay between non-linguistic entities and language is considered. Pragmatic or not, an interest in things, material culture and the materiality of ideas is yet to make significant inroads into the social science mainstream or,

more significantly for our purposes, populism studies. In this article, we suggest that social scientists have ample reason to reconsider this marginalization of things. Both words and entities, linguistic and non-linguistic media alike, are constitutive of politics, and populism is no exception.

This article is organised as follows. First, we discuss our understanding of populism and methodology. Next, we discuss the two cases studies. The first is the MAGA cap, which illustrates how populism involves both linguistic and non-linguistic media and is often combined with other political outlooks. The second is the yellow vest, which exemplifies how populism can function by itself, without a linguistic referent. The article concludes by considering the implications of a material culture-inspired approach to populism both for scholars of populism and the study of material culture more generally.

2. How to study populism beyond discourse

Given our interest in semiotics, especially in signifiers whose fluctuating meaning is open to contestation, we rule out naturalist and positivist approaches to populism. These include the so-called ideational approach (Mudde 2017) and the political strategy model (Pappas 2012). Neither provides a coherent account of the diverse ways in which populism can exist through objects. By reducing populism to a set of ideas that are typically studied as individual-level attitudes or claim-making, the ideational approach is silent about material objects. Likewise, the reduction of populism to rational strategizing on the part of self-interested political leaders misses out the emotional dimension of any process of populist mobilization and identity-formation.

The discourse approach inaugurated by Ernesto Laclau (2005) seems more promising than its naturalist counterparts. By shifting scholars' attention away from contents and towards the *process* by which different social demands are articulated (using chains of equivalence)

into a populist construction of "the people," populism research gained an unprecedented degree of theoretical consistency and sophistication in the definition of its object. Most discourse analyses of populism, however, conceive of "discourse" in more positivist terms than Laclau envisioned. A case in point is Bonikowski, who treats populism as a "speech-level phenomenon" available to all political actors regardless of their convictions; it is a strategic tool "selected based on context" (2016, p. 14). Likewise, Brubaker examines populism as a discursive and stylistic repertoire centred on the "claim to speak and act in the name of the people", which encompasses elements such as majoritarianism, anti-institutionalism, and protectionism, and a distinct "self-presentational, and body-behavioural style" (2017, p. 362, 366). The discourse-theoretical approach to studying populism has considerable advantages over ontic approaches – not least in shifting our attention away from static sociological categories to the practices that make such categories possible. It also enables an increased focus on the strategic use of claims to represent "the people" (De Cleen & Stavrakakis 2017). Yet, by reducing populism to a linguistic phenomenon, discursive approaches downplay the extent to which populism manifests itself through, and depends upon, material culture.

The same shortcomings cannot be attributed to Laclau, whose conception of discourse encompasses both linguistic and non-linguistic media. Laclau's definition of populism as the logic of enmity, however, encounters two difficulties. First, this political antagonism involves the definition of a mortal enemy, a vilification which appears more characteristic of nationalism than populism itself (Frisch 1993). Second, the contours of populism in Laclau's writings are overtly abstract and general, with little consideration for the constitutive role of material things in populist politics.

In part to address these shortcomings, this article defines populism as a specific logic of social and political action: democratic resentment. This model of populism shares a broadly similar orientation towards semiotics as Laclau's ontology of enmity. Like Laclau, populism

is not equated with an "ontic" content (e.g., a type of discourse), but with a "logic" that organizes whatever substantive contents social agents mobilise. However, the logic of democratic resentment is not a determinative ontology in the sense of Laclau's enmity (Chin 2021). More modestly, the logic of resentment merely helps to give meaning to its contents. Crucially, however, these contents include material non-linguistic entities. Moreover, since enmity is more narrowly fueled by feelings of hatred oriented towards the physical destruction of the other (such as an enemy combatant), we believe democratic resentment is more adequate to address the rivalrous competition involved in populist politics in advanced democratic societies.

Democratic resentment is not an individual emotion or sentiment, but an affect that patterns social and political action. This notion of affect bears some resemblance with Spinoza's concept of affect as a phenomenon that exceeds what is actualized through language and action (see Massumi 2002). However, contrary to Spinozist accounts, which often emphasise the pre-social nature of affect, affect here is defined as thoroughly social, a general normative framework of social and political action (see Demertzis 2006). Democratic resentment, in particular, is an affective patterning of collective action in democratic societies, i.e., collectivities that are normatively oriented towards and whose political institutions are organized according to principles of popular sovereignty and equal respect. It channels perceived violations of the democratic promise (of equality and popular sovereignty) into a critique of the present and a demand for imminent political change (Canovan 2002). This logic stipulates four necessary conditions for populism to emerge: equality denied, perceived undeserved inferiority, rivalry, and redemption. Populists share with democrats a normative orientation towards equality. However, unlike democrats, populists use the betrayal of these norms to divide the people into two rivalrous parts, where one part is blamed for the suffering of the other. Finally, populists typically make a redemptive appeal, demanding the restoration

of the democratic promise (Silva and Vieira 2018, 2019). In its focus on collective action, the populist logic of democratic resentment unfolds not only through language but also through material objects, whose physical properties enable and constrain material populist practices.

This definition of populism shifts away from a narrow focus on language and towards a broader concern with both language and material culture (Abrams and Gardner forthcoming). We examine the physicality of objects and their effect on practices (see Gibson 2006). The materiality of these man-made objects "exerts a force that in human hands becomes a social force" (Boivin 2008, p. 6). Our focus on material culture does not deny the significance of cognitive processes, which remain central to populist politics. It suggests, however, that the relationship between concepts and material objects is neither random nor arbitrary. As material signifiers, they are linked in concrete and emotionally charged ways to the notions they signify. Thus, in an endeavour to overcome Saussurean distinctions between the ideal and the material and between subjects and objects, we recognise that things "have power over humans and their lives" (Jones & Boivin 2010, p. 5).

Our starting point is C.S. Peirce's pragmaticism, specifically his concept of the "icon." Like Saussure, Peirce sees symbolic signs (e.g., the letters of the alphabet) and their referents as arbitrarily related to each other. Yet, Peircean semiotics goes beyond Saussure and his post-structuralists heirs, not only in stressing the role of human interpreters (indispensable for a *symbol* to become a sign), but also in identifying two other, non-arbitrary basic modes of relationship between signs and their referents that are crucial for analysing material culture. The first non-arbitrary mode is the *index*. As Peirce observes, anything "which focuses attention is an index" (1955, p. 109). While symbols cannot be signs without an interpreter, indices cannot be signs without their objects: the image of smoke indicates fire. The second non-arbitrary mode is the *icon*. Icons, such as portraits or statues, formally resemble their objects. This formal resemblance between the signifier and the signified, however, need not be

tangible. Mundane objects, such as caps and vests, can represent abstract ideas or political claims. Peirce stresses that these modes are not mutually exclusive; meaning-production often involves some combination of all three modes.

The methodological implications of these notions are relatively straightforward. Peirce's emphasis on the active role of interpreters is a welcome corrective to approaches that focus exclusively on discourse as an arbitrarily organized constellation of meaning. Interpreters include not only social participants, such as Trump supporters and French protesters, whose intentions and self-understanding are part and parcel of what populism is, but also social observers, in this case, the authors of the present study.

We operationalize the definition of populism as democratic resentment through visual and documentary analysis of material objects (Moffitt 2022). Matter is conceived as having an active role in "constituting society" through its material properties (cf. Hirsch and Smith 2017). The agency of things is neither merely derivative of human agency, nor are things the sole agents in social interactions (Boivin 2008, p. 156, 165). Material objects, rather than being passive props for human thought, help *create* concepts and understanding. This is because objects sit at the heart of social rituals, which encompass "materially, emotionally and sensually oriented" experiences that often exceed the language used by participants (Boivin 2009, p. 267). In such rituals, things gain totemic qualities and nurture bonds between individuals that can seldom be reduced to language. This insight is born out in Émile Durkheim's 1912 *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. In this sociological classic, Durkheim studies totemic artefacts that allow a group to connect abstract ideas with concrete objects, thereby "expressing the social unit tangibly" (1995, p. 231). Effervescent social rituals arouse emotions and attach them to symbolic objects that become central to a group's identity and understanding (Shilling 2005, p. 215). Such appropriation of things in social processes is

crucial for meaning production, not least as it ties objects to the cultural interactions that decide how they are used and understood.

Next, we compare the ways in which objects help create populist ideas and subjectivities. Given the exploratory nature of our study, the corpus of analysis is limited to illustrative empirical items (Davis 2006). Using newspaper, magazine and television coverage of each populist icon, as well as personal testimonies, we analyse the physical properties of the objects in question and the practices through which they were used, appropriated, and deployed in struggles over meaning. Our comparison sheds light on the role of objects in populism, either as things interlaced with words and other political phenomena (section 3), or as things that become populism by themselves (section 4).

3. The MAGA Cap

This section analyses the perhaps most iconic paraphernalia of Donald Trump's presidency – red baseball caps stitched with white capital letters spelling out the slogan *Make America Great Again* (MAGA). MAGA caps were omnipresent during Trump's 2016 election campaign. Their sheer ubiquity, however, rendered them almost invisible to populism scholars. In what follows, we explore the materiality of the MAGA cap and thereby try to make the invisible visible. MAGA caps, we argue, illustrate how populism and nationalism can be combined into a powerful message. As suggested, the cap's materiality spans both linguistic and non-linguistic media. We turn first to the affectively charged slogan, embroidered on the front of the cap.

The words *Make America Great Again* mobilise a blend of grievance and emotion, from hatred and pathological envy to socio-political indignation – resentment was, from the start, one of the driving forces of Trumpism and its signature phrase (Cramer 2016). Some see in *Make America Great Again* an ideological fantasy and another rendition of the myth of

American exceptionalism (McMillan 2017). Yet, the promise contained within this slogan is striking for its vagueness. Used by Presidents Ronald Reagan (Republican) and Bill Clinton (Democrat) before becoming Donald Trump's signature phrase, *Make America Great Again* is an exemplary empty signifier. It can mean anything from a return to Wilsonian internationalism to Trump's nationalist promise to put America first. Trump's discourses, including his speeches and Twitter posts, are the obvious starting point for an analysis of the specific political meanings assigned to these words by the former president (e.g., Venizelos 2022, p. 8, 10). A focus on discourse alone, however, cannot fully account for Trump's nationalist brand of populism. It fails to capture how, from 2016 onwards, the MAGA acronym and the cap that lends it material support became part of America's "cultural landscape," a key component of the visual makeup of streets and shopping malls from Washington to Wisconsin (Jones 2019). If it was not for the acronym (itself, a symbolic condensation of meaning) and its material inscription, the statement *Make America Great Again* would never have become a similarly ubiquitous populist icon. Thus, if we are to understand Trump's populism and how it was articulated with a nationalist persuasion, we cannot separate the slogan and its acronym from the red cap that transforms MAGA into a wearable piece of apparel. As an icon, which is simultaneously a symbol and an index, the MAGA cap's materiality needs to be investigated beyond the linguistic signs that are sewn into it.

Much scholarship has been devoted to analysing *who* wears the MAGA cap, i.e., Trump voters (Graham et al. 2021). The main drivers of the Trump vote were socioeconomic grievances, which can fuel a sense of indignation and cultural anxiety that often devolves into hatred for the other and pathological envy. Among Trump voters, MAGA cap wearers were his most ardent supporters. They were said to be driven by racism (Fording & Schram 2020), white identity politics (Jardina 2019), economic inequality, demographic change (Bobo 2017), and fears about America's demise (Saunders 2017). This constituency buys into a story of

white Americans' declining place in society, a belief that others – including migrants, women, and ethnic minorities – benefit at their expense, and a view of the government as corrupt and dysfunctional. Despite differences within Trump's base, his followers were united in their opposition to Islamism, globalism, and affirmative action as well as a belief that only Trump could *Make America Great Again* (Haynes 2020).

Beyond this political constituency analysis, research into Trumpian populism tends to focus on Trump' political persona. Whether through his masterful manipulation of the media spectacle (Kellner 2018) or his ability to draw new constituencies into the Republican Party (Lamont et al. 2017), Trump's charismatic personality is often seen as key to his political success. While undeniably significant, both structural voter dynamics and political charisma downplay the role things play in Trump's populism. Apart perhaps from the wall that Trump promised to erect on the US border with Mexico, no other physical entity has become so emblematic of Trump's national-populist project as the MAGA cap. Notwithstanding this cultural significance, relatively little outside the realm of journalism and magazine commentary has been said about the cap itself.

Let us begin with the textile nature of this piece of attire. Consisting of six triangular fabric panels, a stiff front visor brim and a pliable plastic strap that makes the hat adjustable to all head sizes, baseball caps have long "escaped the narrow confines of the sports stadium": their colours and logos create affiliations with universities, consumer brands, and presidential campaigns (Kelly 2018, p. 262). In this sense, there is hardly a more fitting medium to embody the Trump phenomenon than the baseball cap. Typifying "affiliation, fashion, and comfort," baseball caps are "solid, reliable and utilitarian" pieces of "Americana gone global" (Kelly 2018, p. 261). In sports stadiums and Trump rallies alike, caps "are not only iconic but totemic": their colours and emblems are "unmistakable, material proclamations of allegiance" (Kelly 2018, p. 271). The MAGA cap's signal red is the colour of the Republican Party, even

if its logos are entirely absent from its design. Instead, the cap's lettering leaves no doubt of the wearer's personal allegiance to Trump. In some counterfeit replicas, the MAGA acronym is supplemented with a patch of the American flag to the right of the front visor, a mark of the wearer's nationalism. The significance of the cap's material form became particularly evident when allegations emerged that it was not produced in the United States. Democrat-leaning commentators were palpably disappointed when an Associated Press inquiry refuted the charge of hypocrisy levelled at Trump for allegedly manufacturing the MAGA cap in China (Horwitz 2016). Although some counterfeit caps were produced overseas, the official cap is 'Made in the USA' by a Los Angeles area manufacturer.

As anthropologists frequently stress, material consumption – including through the purchase of a MAGA cap – is often a form of self-fashioning or a means of joining an imagined community of like-minded consumers. The cap offers its wearers a way of demonstrating their shared commitment to Trump's distinctive brand of politics. Yet, unlike the wearers of designer labels and more akin to sports enthusiasts wearing fan items, buying and wearing a MAGA cap is not merely a symbol of status or distinction. It is a passionate expression of support and a "declaration of allegiance" (Kelly 2018, p. 273). Financial mismanagement and repeat defeats will not turn fans of Liverpool FC into supporters of Manchester United. Likewise, the wearers of the more than one million official MAGA caps sold announce a fidelity to Trump that cannot be broken by political criticism, embarrassing scandals, or policy failures.

At Trump rallies, wearing a MAGA cap is materially performative. The cap creates unity between individuals in the crowd and contributes to the momentous energy of the Trump spectacle. The power of Trump's rallies is generated by swarms of MAGA hat donning loyalists chanting "lock her up", "send them back" or "stop the steal" (Graham et al. 2021). The baseball cap is "something of an equaliser", with Trump's own clumsy way of wearing it creating a commonality between the Manhattan billionaire and his often rural or rustbelt

supporters (Eggers 2016). As a result, one needs to move beyond the paradigm of things-as-text to ask: How does the wearing of a cap make the crowd a populist crowd?

To address this question, we need to complement Peirce's pragmaticism with G.H. Mead's social pragmatism, namely Mead's little-known theory of "social objects" (Mead 2011, p. 21-44), and the even less discussed idea of "social fusion". Akin to Peirce's indexicality, a MAGA cap is a Meadian "social object" in the sense of being an artifact that cannot be neatly separated from the ideas inscribed into it. For Mead, MAGA caps as social objects have three distinctive features. They are relational, in that they elicit social relationships; they are reflective, in the sense of motivating internal deliberation about the claims made through them; and, finally, MAGA caps are contestable – their meaning is both ambiguous and the object of heated disputes. For Mead, in short, the emphasis is on how socially embodied objects come into being and, no less crucially, what happens to the world after their emergence. MAGA caps can be said to trigger "social fusion." In large social gatherings, including the political rallies in support of Trump, Mead sees a process of fusion between individual and social consciousnesses. In such moments of exceptional emotional intensity, Mead claims that the two phases of the self, the "I" and the "me", merge into a collective state of consciousness. When writing about such ritual processes of absolute identification between the individual and the group, Mead had patriotic feelings of allegiance to one's nation in mind (2011, p. 277). But one can move beyond Mead and contemplate the possibility that "social fusion" could include multiple frames of reference. Trump's politics inspire a "social fusion" that involves more than one frame. In fact, his signature populist nationalism articulates the logic of enmity, which animates nationalist feelings, with that of democratic resentment, which underpins the populist predicament.

The collective ritual of the political rally is partly enabled by the wearing of props. If the pragmatists are correct, however, props, including the MAGA cap, are not simply second-

order accessories that passively reflect populist ideas. Instead, it is the collective wearing of the red MAGA cap that, along with chanting and dancing, turns the crowd into a populist crowd. The wearing of the MAGA cap is not only a representation of what populists stand for; wearing a MAGA cap *is* populism. As with any social performance, this process of becoming is fickle. The utterance of the wrong word can make the performance fail; the wearing of the wrong cap, or the absence of MAGA caps, can equally disrupt the performance. Both words and things are needed for the political articulation or successful performance of any logic of action, including the logic of democratic resentment.

MAGA caps transform their wearers into members of Trump's national-populist project. Kanye West, the hip hop celebrity, announced that wearing the MAGA cap made him "feel like superman" (Snapes 2019). Progressive commentators who experimented with wearing the MAGA cap in Democrat strongholds, such as New York City or Los Angeles, describe it as an eerie experience. Like hooligans in the fan curve of the wrong team, they became provocateurs – perceiving hostility wherever they went. Laura Pullman of *The Sunday Times* describes sticking out "like a solitary buoy" and onlookers leaving the subway carriage to sit further away from her (2019). *Los Angeles Magazine*'s Joel Stein described his MAGA cap wearing reflection in the mirror as "smug", "mean" and "like someone I wanted to punch" (2019). Without adopting any of Trump's policies or discourses, the cap altered their external- and self-perception in a fundamental way.

But are changes in meaning and self-perception independent from changes in the physical aspects of the cap? The cap's presence at public appearances of the Proud Boys or at "white lives matter" and "unite the right" rallies, redefines the contours of Trumpism and makes visible the exclusion of migrants, ethnic minorities and Muslims from "the people." In response, opponents of Trump have likened the MAGA cap to the Ku Klux Klan's white hoods

(Wolf 2019). Such practices of appropriation are not limited to the American far right. A case in point is China, where MAGA caps were mutilated to signal resistance to Trump's trade war.

As a populist icon, the signal red MAGA cap is more than a political statement; it is an illocutionary act that produces an effect in the world (Kelly 2018, p. 272). MAGA caps "do something" (Wolf 2019). They *are* resentful anger and hatred mobilised politically – they transform passive citizens into Trump supporters. MAGA caps helped the former president unite a political coalition and create an affinity between himself and the "true people." Perhaps more than any other material artefact in American history, the MAGA cap made the divisions within American society visible, further polarising an already unequal society into two rival parts – "us," the honest, patriotic and hard-working people, versus "them," the corrupt globalist elite, out to betray America and its values. Wearing the MAGA cap became a way of expressing nationalist feelings of allegiance, demonstrating the articulation of populism (fuelled by resentment) and nationalism (fuelled by hatred).[1]

4. The Yellow Vest

Unlike the MAGA cap, few slogans or texts were inscribed on the yellow vests worn by French demonstrators in public squares and road blockades from late 2018 onwards. The *gilet jaunes* are just that – yellow vests worn by a collective involved in acts of protest. But are the vests themselves *doing* politics, are they a mere prop, or is there something more complex going on here? The absence of a linguistic dimension to the vest contributed to the mystery surrounding the protesters' motives. Yet, this lack of words did not prevent the humble yellow vest from becoming a populist icon. On the contrary, it is precisely because it is both an item of clothing that all motorists must possess under French law and a political movement that the yellow vest

[1] For a study that distinguishes between nationalist and populist discourses, see Silva, Manucci and Larraz (2022).

is also, we argue, populism. It is not only a symbolic representation of populism, but populism itself, in the sense of a resentment-driven affect.

The *gilet jaunes* (or yellow vest) movement began on a Saturday, 17 November 2018. Its immediate causes included discontent about the rising cost of living and the introduction of an ecological tax on diesel fuel by President Emmanuel Macron. To everyone's surprise, the protests triggered one of France's most serious political crises in recent decades (Chamorel 2019). Every Saturday from November 2018 to March 2020, thousands of protesters clad in yellow vests took to the streets in demonstrations across major cities and occupied traffic circles and toll booths. The protesters' demands and motivations baffled journalists and commentators alike. *France 24* described the movement as "largely shapeless, leaderless and with no clear ideological bent" (2019). Scholars saw the protests as symptomatic of a "chronic disease," their emergence suggesting a disenchantment with the French political system (Grossman 2019, p. 30). In such explanations, the fluorescent elephant in the room remained largely unaccounted for.

A good starting point for unravelling the complex politics behind the yellow vests is the testimony of the French star author Édouard Louis. Like many of the yellow vest protesters, Louis faced extreme poverty, dispossession and geographical marginalization. For Louis, whose novels depict the social milieu of the *gilet jaunes* with precision, thousands were driven to the streets not by specific political demands but rather by feelings of indignation and resentment directed at the established powers for ignoring their needs and rendering them invisible. Louis has vivid memories of his mother complaining that: "No one is talking about us. No one cares about us" (Louis 2018, p. 3). The yellow vest afforded its wearers a means of capturing the attention of those in power. By wrapping "the body of social exclusion," poverty and precarity with the yellow vest, a universally available and highly conspicuous garment, its wearers ceased to be invisible (Louis 2018, p. 3). Bedecked in a visibility cloak, people long

excluded from politics were now impossible to ignore. This fluorescent expression of indignation served to remind the French polity where constituent power lies: with the people, not their representatives.

Indeed, the yellow vest movement defied conventional political categories. Its participants coordinated not through the hierarchical structures and organisational patterns associated with industrial action, but through social media (Wilkin 2020). Yet, their actions vastly exceeded the realm of cyberspace. They took to the streets and left a profound and lasting imprint in countless roundabouts and cities across France. While attempts to quantify membership of the yellow vests suggest a strong following among far-left, far-right and non-voters (Bendali & Kabbaj 2019), neither Marine Le Pen's right-wing *Rassemblement National* nor Jean-Luc Mélenchon's left-wing *Le France Insoumise* were able to co-opt the movement (Lianos 2019). This ideological indeterminacy led many to draw disparate and often contradictory analogies between the yellow vests and the French Revolution's guillotines and Phrygian bonnets (Kouvelakis 2019), Poujadism (Lem 2020), Occupy Wall Street (Shultziner & Kornblit 2020), and, in the case of Macron's accounts minister Gerard Darmanin, a (fascist) "brown plague" (Wilkin 2020, p. 71).

Despite the radical ambiguity surrounding their motivations, the fact remains that the protesters arrogated the colour yellow. The fluorescent yellow vest created a physical demarcation between "the people" and the Elysée Palace, which enabled a heterogenous group to unite around populist themes. These include the definition of the people as a "community of committed workers who produce the nation's true wealth", a rejection of the political class (Guerra et al. 2019, p. 2), a desire for national homogeneity (Kouvelakis 2019), and a demand for participatory democracy (Lem 2020, p. 298). The yellow vests do not reject the state as a whole. Instead, they demand the *restoration* of economic justice shattered by rising rents, falling incomes and increased commuting distances. They also demand a return to the moral

order violated by a condescending president who describes his opponents as “slackers and cynics” (Fassin & Defossez 2019).

The *shape* of the protests is defined by a distinctive, shared material culture. Anyone who wears the yellow vest in a Saturday protest is a *gilet jaunes*. The universal accessibility and ubiquity of an item owned by all motorists fostered participation. Many protestors had never joined demonstrations before and eschewed union or party affiliations. Accessibility and ubiquity also explain the protest’s ability to transcend geography as well as age and gender divides. Despite this profound sociological and ideological diversity, protestors were unified by their orientation toward the same “social object”. “In principle and practice”, Lem aptly observes, “whoever dons a Yellow Vest is considered to belong” (2020, p. 404). More than a mere “symbol of protest” (Shultziner & Kornblit 2020, p. 537), the vest transforms its wearer into a participant in a momentous political project. Wearing the vest inspires a feeling of unity and solidarity among the protesters, and the sympathy of many onlookers (Kimmelman 2018). Protesters describe a sense of spontaneous fraternity, a collective atmosphere, and a clear demarcation from the elites (Chamorel 2019): “At the roadblock we don’t ask each other what jobs we have or how we vote. We are all just yellow vests and that’s all” (BBC News 2018). For participants in the movement, the yellow vest ceased to be an expression of the regulatory authority of the state and becomes a subversive and energising artefact (Clifton & de la Broise 2020, p. 373). Wearing and appropriating it in this way entails adopting a new political identity – an identity forged in opposition to the legal authority and its representatives around shared feelings of rancour, indignation and resentment.

Crucially, the sense of community evoked by wearing the yellow vest emerges from, and is enabled by, the specific material culture developed around this garment. Relying on a variant of Latour’s Actor Network Theory (ANT), Clifton and de la Broise studied how physical objects influence the “communicative constitution” of the yellow vest movement

(2020, p. 362). Their analysis of a YouTube video, filmed at a toll booth occupied by the yellow vests, concludes that the movement is constituted by an assemblage of human and non-human actants such as space, buildings (here the burning toll booth) and objects (both the yellow vest and the fire burning the toll booth). In this interpretation, the yellow vest movement does not pre-exist communication; "it originates in and through socio-material practices, such as the use of social media, that are *inter alia* a medium of its existence" (Clifton & de la Broise 2020, p. 363).

While Clifton and de la Broise's ANT-inspired approach helps us dismantle dichotomies between humans and artefacts in the construction of meaning, their focus on horizontal networks of human and non-human "actants" obscures two fundamental facts. First, their horizontal model of distributed agency is noticeably unfit to address matters of power and inequality. Distinctively human problems require analytical models that distinguish between different levels of agency and, correspondingly, different levels of ethical-political responsibility. Second, they underestimate human agency, including its interaction with the material world. Objects are significant to the material practices that constitute the populist movement; it would be a mistake, however, to ignore the fact that humans remain the principal wielders of agency. People removed the vests from the trunks of motor vehicles and brought them to roundabouts and city centres. Moreover, protesters utilised the blank spaces on the vest to reinforce the association of the garment with populist rebellion rather than road-safety. Newspapers and television programmes showcased yellow vests adorned with an image of Macron's face emblazoned with the word "dictator" (DW 2019) and vests sporting handwritten slogans such as "Macron, President of the rich" (Bisserbe 2019) and, referring to the diesel tax, "Ecology is only an alibi" (Kimmelman 2018).

While this communicative property of the yellow vests is obviously important, care should also be taken to attend to the ritual and experiential dimensions of populist icons.

Yellow vests do not simply make representations about politics and society. They confer a sense of belonging to a greater whole, membership of a politically significant "we, the people." Contra Clifton and de la Broise, the yellow vest is not only a "spokesobject" that "communicates with, and acts on" its onlookers (2020, p. 367). It also enables experiences of fraternity, oneness and political significance among political subjects who formerly felt invisible. The yellow vest is constitutive to this process, yet humans remain at the heart of the action – they create the culture around a specific populist icon.

Finally, the attention that Clifton and de la Broise accord to a myriad of items that are all co-constitutive of the protest movement fails to give credence to the special significance of the yellow vest as a populist icon. Rather than treating one YouTube video as determinative of "the 'just whatness' of the *gilet jaune* protest movement" (Clifton & de la Broise 2020, p. 370), we argue that there is something unique about the vest that sets it apart from all other material objects present. The yellow vest makes acts of violence and vandalism by its wearers political. It also sets these actions apart from those of more programmatic groups such as Antifa or Fridays for Future.

In a way, the proof is in the name. The movement is not about combating fascism or securing an environmentally sustainable future for coming generations. While the yellow vest is the "symbol of the car" and the "uniform for every French citizen" (Wilkin 2020, p. 81), it is also the embodiment of a resentment-fuelled and populist "we, the people" against corrupt and neglectful elites. The yellow vest represents the invisible men and women from France's villages, cities and peripheries on the national stage. Once activated by the logic of democratic resentment, the yellow vest confers membership in a broader movement and nurtures a feeling of solidarity between individuals, whilst also clearly demarcating the protestors from elites and counter protesters. No words are needed to accomplish this. The yellow vest is, in this precise sense, populism in its purest form; its power is fuelled by a deep sentiment of rage and

indignation by a part of the people who, like Édouard Louis' sister (2018, p. 7), feel "left behind," "humiliated," and "insulted" by the elite. An affective logic transformed the most common of garments into the ultimate populist icon of twenty-first century France. *We*, the yellow vests, are the people: not Macron, the police, or the courts.

5. Conclusions

This exploratory study began with a question: What is the role of things in populism? Our answer: Things constitute a neglected yet crucial aspect of populist politics. This is true both when things are interwoven with words and/or other political phenomena, as in the case of the MAGA cap, and when things by themselves become populism, as with the yellow vest.

Drawing upon Peirce's emphasis on our role as social observers, we analysed the collective definition of the MAGA cap and the yellow vest as *symbols*, *indices*, and *icons* of populism. As symbols, these mundane objects become populist signs when worn by collectives of human agents – Trump supporters and French protesters, respectively. As indices, these objects are wearable artifacts that cannot be neatly separated from the ideas inscribed on them. As an index, both the MAGA cap and the yellow vest, we argue, *are* populism. Alongside being signs of populism (symbolism) and populist artifacts (indexicality), the MAGA cap and the yellow vest are also icons, i.e., emblems for the political claims of their wearers. The MAGA cap and the yellow vest, from this pragmatic perspective, do not represent populism arbitrarily, as discourse-oriented approaches assume. On the contrary, as Peirce's triadic conception of meaning-making clarifies, they also represent populism in two equally crucial, non-arbitrary ways. As symbol-index-icons the two items are condensed emotional energy, whose symbolic effect results both from their material production and social life. The MAGA cap and the yellow vest exist as historical objects with a complex performativity that includes their prescribed use but also their modification, appropriation, and destruction. Without an

account of their materiality, to put it in slightly different terms, one cannot see how these objects work both as vehicles for political-moral meaning and as things, as hardware. The analysis of their material qualities, from wearability to high visibility, is indispensable if we are to fully account for how each object became the material embodiment of the logic of democratic resentment.

Our exploratory study also hints at crucial differences between these pieces of apparel – and the attendant expressions of populism. The MAGA cap allowed us to explore how populism and nationalism can be articulated in the same political movement. MAGA caps emerge from our study as icons, whose physical properties enable and constrain Trump's peculiar politics, which articulate populism with nationalism. MAGA caps are divisive: the white lettering pitting those who want to *Make America Great Again* against those who do not, their red colour representing the GOP, and their informality functioning as a marker of class distinction. Yet, by dividing one part of the polity from another, they also help bring together those who wear it. As our study suggests, wearing the MAGA cap is an important enabler of pro-Trump mobilization.

In turn, the yellow vest illustrates a less divisive, more straightforwardly populist icon. The yellow vest worn by the French demonstrators is the ultimate mundane object, a piece of clothing dictated by law to accompany all drivers. Its ubiquity made it invisible until human agents deployed it to make their grievances – material and moral – all too visible to France's political and cultural elites. Once politically charged, the yellow vest became a populist icon. The yellow vests of this leaderless, slogan-thin and strictly non-programmatic protest movement are not simply a representation of what populism is or what it stands for; they are themselves populism. The yellow vest is a representation of the people's demand to be heard but, by virtue of its high visibility and sheer ubiquity, it is also embodied constituent power.

Its message is clear and unmistakably populist. The political bodies of the demonstrators, once collectively assembled, are the sovereign political body.

Several more general conclusions can be drawn from our study. Language is central to meaning-making, but so are things. In calling attention to material culture and the role that things play in politics we are, of course, hardly alone. Rather, this study joins a longstanding conversation about how politics is done not only through words but also through objects. Material objects can be potent political tools in themselves as they help mobilise, coordinate, and motivate political agents.

We have focussed, here, on a specific type of politics, populism, and a particular kind of material object, apparel. This brings us to our second general conclusion. Like all social and political phenomena, populism is more than just words. Without reference to material culture, our understanding of populism is unduly limited. Laclau's original concern with discourse as encompassing both language and material practice was a step in the right direction, one that present day discourse analysts tend to overlook. Yet Laclau's approach remains limited in two fundamental accounts, which this study sought to correct. First, his suggestion that populism is animated by the logic of enmity has pointed some in the wrong direction. Populist politics, we argue, is not primarily animated by enmity but by resentment, specifically democratic resentment.[2] Second, populist politics can work in articulation with other political phenomena, such as nationalism, as well as through linguistic and non-linguistic media. Language and interpreters matter, but so do things. Overall, then, the present study serves as an important first step towards the systematic examination of the materiality of political ideas.

[2] It is important to note, however, that resentment is often a key part of minority nationalism and post-colonialism nationalism, which are distinct from the majority nationalism present in rich democracies like the United States. Likewise, enmity can be seen to contribute to populist politics, especially when infused with nationalist sentiment. We thank an anonymous referee for this clarification.

References

Abrams, B. and P. Gardner (forthcoming) *Symbolic Objects in Contentious Politics*. Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press.

Bendali, Z., & Kabbaj, G. (2019). *Ideological divisions in the 'yellow vest' movement*. Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung. https://www.rosalux.eu/en/article/1435.ideological-divisions-in-the-lyellow-vestr-movement.html

Bisserbe, N. (2019). French Protesters Hang Up Their Yellow Vests. *Wall Street Journal*, June 16. https://www.wsj.com/articles/french-protesters-hang-up-their-yellow-vests-11560677402

Blok, A., & Jensen, C. B. (2019). The Anthropocene event in social theory. *The Sociological Review*, *67*(6), 1195–1211. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038026119845551

Bobo, L. D. (2017). Racism in Trump's America. *The British Journal of Sociology*, *68*(S1), S85–S104. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.12324

Boivin, N. (2008). *Material cultures, material minds*. Cambridge University Press.

Boivin, N. (2009). Grasping the elusive and unknowable. *Material Religion*, *5*(3), 266–287. https://doi.org/10.2752/175183409X12550007729860

Bonikowski, B. (2016). Three Lessons of Contemporary Populism in Europe and the United States. *Brown Journal of World Affairs*, *23*(1), 9–24.

Brubaker, R. (2017). Why populism? *Theory and Society*, *46*(5), 357–385. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11186-017-9301-7

Canovan, M. (2002) Taking Politics to the People: Populism as the Ideology of Democracy. In: Mény Y and Surel Y (eds) *Democracies and the Populist Challenge*. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, pp. 25–44. DOI: 10.1057/9781403920072_2.

Chamorel, P. (2019). Macron versus the Yellow Vests. *Journal of Democracy*, *30*(4), 48–62.

Chin C (2021) Just What Is Ontological Political Theory Meant to do?. *Political Studies* 69(4): 771–790. DOI: 10.1177/0032321720925491.

Clifton, J., & de la Broise, P. (2020). The yellow vests and the communicative constitution of a protest movement. *Discourse & Communication*, *14*(4), 362–382. https://doi.org/10.1177/1750481320910516

Cramer, K. J. (2016). *The Politics of Resentment*. University of Chicago Press.

Davis, P. (2006) Exploratory Research. In V. Jupp (Ed.), *SAGE Dictionary of Social Research Methods*. London: Sage.

De Cleen, B., & Stavrakakis, Y. (2017). Distinctions and Articulations. *Javnost - The Public*, *24*(4), 301–319. https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2017.1330083

Demertzis, N. (2006). Emotions and Populism. In S. Clarke, P. Hoggett, & S. Thompson (Eds.), *Emotion, Politics and Society* (pp. 103–122). Palgrave Macmillan UK. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230627895_7

Durkheim, E. (1995). *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life.* The Free Press.

DW (2019). *France: Tear gas fired as yellow vests attempt comeback*, November 16. https://www.dw.com/en/france-tear-gas-fired-as-yellow-vests-attempt-comeback/a-51276404

Eggers, D. (2016, June 17). 'Could he actually win?' *The Guardian*. http://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/jun/17/could-he-actually-win-dave-eggers-donald-trump-rally-presidential-campaign

Fassin, D., & Defossez, A.-C. (2019). *The Yellow Vests Movement, an Unidentified Political Object*. Institute for Advanced Study. https://www.ias.edu/ideas/yellow-vests-movement

Fording, R. C., & Schram, S. F. (2020). *Hard White*. Oxford University Press.

France 24. (2019). *A year of insurgency*, November 16. https://www.france24.com/en/20191116-a-year-of-insurgency-how-yellow-vests-left-indelible-mark-on-french-politics

Frisch MJ (1993) The emergence of nationalism as a political philosophy. *History of European Ideas* 16(4–6). Routledge: 885–890. DOI: 10.1016/0191-6599(93)90236-J.

Gibson, W. (2006). Material Culture and Embodied Action. *The Sociological Review*, *54*(1), 171–187. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2006.00607.x

Graham, A., et al. (2021). Who Wears the MAGA Hat? *Socius 7*. https://doi.org/10.1177/2378023121992600

Grossman, E. (2019). France's Yellow Vests. *Political Insight*, *10*(1), 30–34. https://doi.org/10.1177/2041905819838152

Guerra, T., Alexandre, C., & Gonthier, F. (2019). Populist Attitudes among the French Yellow Vests. *Populism*, *3*(1), 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1163/25888072-02021039

Haynes, J. (2020). Trump's America. *Democratization*, *27*(4), 681–687. https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2019.1685505

Hirsch, S., & Smith, A. (2017). A view through a window. *The Sociological Review*, *66*(1), 224–240. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038026117724068

Jardina, A. (2019). *White Identity Politics*. Cambridge University Press.

Jones, A. M., & Boivin, N. (2010). *The Malice of Inanimate Objects*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199218714.013.0014

Jones, B. (2019). The MAGA Hat, a Curious Artifact of Contemporary America. *Anthropology News*, *60*(4). https://doi.org/10.1111/AN.1231

Kellner, D. (2018). Donald Trump and the Politics of the Spectacle. In S. Çoban (Ed.), *Media, Ideology and Hegemony*. Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004364417

Kelly, W. W. (2018). The ubiquitous baseball cap. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, *18*(2), 261–278. https://doi.org/10.1177/1469540517744693

Kimmelman, M. (2018). France's Yellow Vests Reveal a Crisis of Mobility in All Its Forms. *The New York Times,* December 20. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/20/world/europe/france-yellow-vests-social-mobility.html

Kouvelakis, S. (2019). The French Insurgency. *New Left Review*, *116/117*, 75–98.

Laclau, E. (1990). *New reflections on the revolution of our time: Ernesto Laclau*. Verso.

Laclau, E. (2005). *On populist reason*. Verso.

Lamont, M., Park, B. Y., & Ayala-Hurtado, E. (2017). Trump's electoral speeches and his appeal to the American white working class. *The British Journal of Sociology*, *68*(S1), S153–S180. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.12315

Lem, W. (2020). Notes on militant populism in contemporary France. *Dialectical Anthropology*, *44*(4), 397–413. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10624-020-09595-1

Lianos, M. (2019). Yellow vests and European democracy. *European Societies*, *21*(1), 1–3. https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2019.1570055

Louis, É. (2018, December 14). To Exist in the Eyes of Others. *The New Yorker*. https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/to-exist-in-the-eyes-of-others-an-interview-with-the-novelist-edouard-louis-on-the-gilets-jaunes-movement

Massumi, B. (2002). *Parables for the virtual*. Duke University Press.

McMillan, C. (2017). MakeAmericaGreatAgain. *Subjectivity*, *10*(2), 204–222. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41286-017-0024-z

Mead, G. H. (2011). *G.H. Mead: A reader*. Routledge.

Moffitt, B. (2016). *The global rise of populism*. Stanford University Press.

Moffitt, B. (2022). Taking Account of the Visual Politics of Populism. *Polity, 54(3)*: 1-18.

Mudde, C. (2017). Populism: An Ideational Approach. In C. R. Kaltwasser et al. (Eds.), *Populism* (Vol. 1). Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198803560.013.1

Peirce, C. S. (1955). *Philosophical writings of Peirce*. Dover Publications.

Protevi, J. (2009). *Political affect*. University of Minnesota Press.

Pullman, L. (2019, February 3). *What happened when I wore a 'Maga' cap in Donald Trump's home city*. https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/my-trump-cap-triggers-scowls-growls-and-spit-in-his-home-city-jdc6tjdf8

Saunders, G. (2017). Trump Days. In S. Holt & T. A. S. of M. Editors (Eds.), *The Best American Magazine Writing 2017* (pp. 131–162). Columbia University Press. https://doi.org/10.7312/asme18159-009

Savage, R. (2010). Populist Elements in Contemporary American Political Discourse. *The Sociological Review*, *58*, 169–188. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2011.01968.x

Shilling, C. (2005). Embodiment, emotions, and the foundations of social order. In J. C. Alexander & P. Smith (Eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Durkheim* (pp. 211–238). Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL9780521806725.009

Shultziner, D., & Kornblit, I. S. (2020). French Yellow Vests. *Sociological Forum*, *35*(2), 535–542. https://doi.org/10.1111/socf.12593

Silva, F.C., Manucci, L. & Larraz, D.V. (2022). Populism and Nationalism Revisited. A Comparative Study of the Spanish and Portuguese New Left. *Nations and Nationalism*: 1-30.

Silva, F.C. & Vieira, M.B. (2019). Populism as a Logic of Political Action. *European Journal of Social Theory* 22(4): 497-512.

Silva, F.C. & Vieira, M.B. (2018). Populism and the Politics of Redemption. *Thesis Eleven* 149: 10–30.

Snapes, L. (2019). Kanye West pledges to perform in Maga hat, and reaffirms presidential ambitions. *The Guardian*, January 2. http://www.theguardian.com/music/2019/jan/02/kanye-west-pledges-to-perform-in-maga-hat-reaffirms-presidential-ambitions

Stein, J. (2019). The Time I Wore a MAGA Hat to Lunch at Café Gratitude. *Los Angeles Magazine*, May 8. https://www.lamag.com/citythinkblog/maga-hat-joel-stein/

Venizelos, G. (2022) Donald Trump in Power. *Critical Sociology*: 1-21. https://doi.org/10.1177/08969205221118223

Who are France's 'yellow vests'? (2018, December 1). BBC News. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/world-europe-46405583

Wilkin, P. (2020). Fear of a Yellow Planet. *Journal of World-Systems Research*, *26*(1), 70-102-70–102. https://doi.org/10.5195/jwsr.2020.902

Wolf, C. (2019). *The MAGA Hat Is Still an Object of Hate*. GQ, January 25. https://www.gq.com/story/maga-hat-march-for-life