

Doctor of Political Science

Political indignation: a conceptual and empirical investigation of indignant citizens (Belgium, 2017-2020)

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Abstract

The dissertation develops and empirically documents the concept of political indignation as key affect of the contemporary crisis of political representation. Taking stock of the current affective turn in social sciences, the dissertation uses indignation as heuristic tool to investigate the discourses and practices of citizens in four substantially different contexts of political contention, namely: the *Citizen Platform for Refugee Support*, the *Youth for Climate* movement, the Belgian *Yellow Vests* movements, and the radical-right movement *Schild & Vrienden*. More specifically, the dissertation pursues three objectives: 1) A conceptualization of political indignation, 2) The development of a methodological framework to study political indignation, together with an empirical documentation of its different features and dimensions, 3) A normative discussion on the implications of political indignation for society, democracy and political research.

First, the conceptualization of political indignation (objective 1) is anchored in contemporary affect theory and social movements studies, while also taking inspiration from the recent constructivist turn in theories of political representation. Among the most important conceptual findings lie the definition of political indignation as a *fabric of non-electoral representation*, through the processes of affective imitation and affective resonance. In addition, the conceptualization sheds light on the distinctive performative aspects of political indignation as an affect that publicly denounces, mobilizes, and brings collective subjects into being. Here, the dissertation unpacks the specific ways in which political indignation acts as a trigger for protest and collective action, by identifying three stages of *affective transformation*.

Second, drawing on recent affective methodologies, the dissertation develops a methodological framework tailored to the observation and analysis of political indignation, in its semantic and semiotic forms of expressions (objective 2). The dissertation combines discursive psychology and collective action frame analysis to analyze a diverse corpus of data composed of focus groups discussions, social media data, and participant observations, carried out in each case study. The empirical results shed light on the variety of shapes and forms of political indignation, in particular in terms of its roles in processes of non-electoral representation, mobilization, and in the broader context of political conflictuality. In the case of the *Citizen Platform for Refugee Support*, the dissertation documents the role of compassion and a politics of proximity in representing overlooked subjectivities and dissolving the boundaries between indignant citizens and 'other humans like us'. In the case of the *Belgian Yellow Vests movement*, the dissertation documents the role of indignation as an empowering '*tipping point*' and a place of radical democratic demands from citizens to political institutions. In the case of the *Youth for Climate movement*, the dissertation documents the role of indignation as a '*talkative affect*' that produces three distinctive '*indignation stories*' that shed light on the conflicting temporalities of climate change: unworthy politics, economic abuse and human survival. Lastly, in the case of the radical-right movement *Schild & Vrienden*, the dissertation documents the specific role of media-indignation as credibility mechanism and representative strategy in the metapolitical battle of the movement against the multicultural society.

Third, and finally, the dissertation engages in a scholarly discussion (objective 3) on the normative implications tied to political indignation and the political discourses of indignant citizens. Here, it first explores the relationship between the four cases of study and contemporary political conflict, using Bruno Latour's political geography as contextual and normative framework. Based on a comparative analysis of the affective arrangements of indignation in each case, the dissertation highlights the ongoing struggles on matters of territoriality, materiality, temporality and truth. The dissertation then discusses the importance of power-differentials when unpacking different expressions of political indignation, and their effects on society and democracy at large. It highlights both the asymmetrical crises of representation that cut across the four cases under study – between total rupture and remaining attachments to the system of representative democracy – and a constituent pattern of critique articulated around affective disconnection, democratic myopia and betrayal.