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SOCIAL NETWORKS AS POPULAR LEARNING AND EMANCIPATING SPACES: THE CASE OF THE YELLOW VESTS' MOVEMENT IN FRANCE

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Abstract

In this work, we try to discern how social networks could become a learning structure, between peers and self-taught individuals, to access the public sphere, and act politically, in the case of a social movement which was popular and particularly heterogenous. We, especially, rely on Nancy Fraser's theory of alternative discursive spaces and of counterpublics to analyse our subject, and examine the social movement of the Gilets Jaunes which took place in France, between 2018 and 2019, as it seems relevant and heuristic on this matter.

Keywords: Counterpublic, Public sphere, Social network, Social movement, Informal learning, Popular education, Emancipation

Résumé

Dans cette communication, nous souhaitons exposer comment les réseaux sociaux ont pu constituer, dans le cadre d'un mouvement social, populaire et hétérogène, un moyen d'apprentissage, entre pairs et autodidactes, pour appréhender la sphère publique et l'expression politique. Nous prenons, ici, appui sur la théorie de Nancy Fraser sur les espaces de discussion concurrentiels et des contrepúbliques pour analyser le cas du mouvement des Gilets Jaunes, en France, entre 2018 et 2019.

Keywords: Contrepúblique, Sphère publique, Réseaux sociaux, Mouvements sociaux, Apprentissage informel, Éducation populaire, Emancipation

INTRODUCTION

The Gilets Jaunes (Yellow Vests)'s movement has arisen in France in fall 2018 and lasted until fall 2019. It all started when the French government decided to increase the oil taxes and then the oil price for many workers depending on their car on a daily basis. This link to the oil and car issues is the source of the yellow vest dress code. Anger amongst the working people, the upper and lower popular classes, arose and spread rapidly. Soon, it became a movement, born out of any established and structured parties, unions or organizations, without any leaders or personalities, any political programme or background. This was an unprecedented phenomenon.

Considering these characteristics and relying on Nancy Fraser's theory, we can assess the Yellow Vests were a subaltern counterpublic.

Rather immediately, they were mocked and despised by the elites, altogether the politics and the media, and distrusted by the middle class. Some academics dismissed the movement as populist but others took a rather observatory stance. Indeed, the Yellow vests managed to access the public sphere and gain enough weight to set their own agenda and frames to media and politics.

So, not only did they become a subaltern counterpublic but they did become a strong counterpublic, as Nancy Fraser puts it. By that, it is meant that they were a public able to dominate the political stage and impose its topics, views and decisions. Consequently, the French government was forced, indeed, to make a social shift in its policies and to propose a bill of law for an emergency plan cancelling the tax rise on oil and favouring low incomes and small pensions. This bill, for a plan estimated at 10 billion euros, was adopted in December 2018.

Since 2006 and the movements against the bill of the first-job-contract (*Contrat première embauche* — *CPE*) directed to the under 26-year-old young people, no social movement in France had had the power to change the course of the public action (Bendali et al., 2019).

Our postulate, here, is that the Yellow Vests became a strong public turning Facebook into a learning device for digital and political popular education, between peers and self-taught individuals.

In the following sections, we shall focus on the learning the Yellow Vests had to make to comply with the criteria of Nancy Fraser's strong counterpublic in her theorization of the public sphere.

After recalling briefly Nancy Fraser's theory and specifying our methodology, we will examine three learning aspects they could develop.

First, we will describe how the Yellow Vests, a subaltern public deprived of access to mainstream media, used Facebook to learn and create a competing public sphere. In the second section, we will see their acquiring of the codes and skills to reach the public sphere. The third and final section will deal with their political project and their learning of becoming a strong public.

FRASER'S THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

In this communication, we refer to Nancy Fraser's theory, which states that a 'multiplicity of publics is preferable to a single public sphere' (Fraser, 1990, p. 77). This is one of her main points to sustain the critique 'of the limits of actually existing democracy in late capitalist societies' (Fraser, 1990, p. 77).

More specifically, we use the main following concepts linked to the public sphere: counterpublics, subaltern counterpublics, strong counterpublics.

According to Fraser 'the bourgeois public was never the public' (Fraser, 1990, p. 61). Indeed, a closer look into history shows that contemporaneously to the bourgeois public other publics arose such as 'nationalist publics, popular peasant publics, elite women publics, and working-class publics' (Fraser, 1990, p. 61). But as the norms of the bourgeois public tend to become hegemonic, the other publics were doomed to become competing publics, at best, and subaltern publics, at worst. Actually, they were all counterpublics. Thus the public sphere was never the idealized arena where equal citizens can debate but rather a 'public life in which multiple but unequal publics participate' (Fraser, 1990, p. 70). Besides counterpublics, Fraser makes another distinction considering strong and weak publics. Strong publics are these groups

whose deliberation encompasses 'opinion formation and decision-making'. Parliaments are relevant examples of this kind of public. When groups' deliberation practices result rather in opinion formation only, they are called weak publics.

Given those definitions, the Yellow Vests' movement illustrates Fraser's concepts, both that of counterpublic and of strong public. Indeed, first, they were able to conceive themselves as a public challenging bourgeois public sphere, and secondly, they became a strong public able to impose their decisions to the French government.

The empirical data, here, are secondary data as we took ground on the quantitative and qualitative analyses provided by various research articles dealing with the subject in different fields, mainly in political science and sociology.

RESULTS

Facebook as a learning tool for the competing public sphere

Facebook was the tool mainly used by the Yellow Vest's movement to communicate and organize actions. It is surprising as Facebook seems a symbol of the less significantly educative and the most neoliberal project. Moreover, it tends now to be replaced by Instagram amongst the youth. Anyway, these social media are part of Mark Zuckerberg's Meta Platforms. Their use comes to such a point we can almost say they are 'naturalized' and part of the common life.

Quantitative statistics seem to corroborate this approach. Thus, focusing on groups with more than 100 members, researchers identified 1,548 Facebook groups accounting for 4,263,693 members, in December 2018 (Boyer *et al.*, 2020). Moreover, a similarity can be made between the Facebook network use and the geographical space occupation from local to national scope. The 1,548 Facebook groups were distributed between 834 groups at local level, 430 at a higher level and 287 at the national (Boyer *et al.*, 2020). For Lefebvre (2019), Facebook became the roundabout of the roundabouts where they erect huts or barracks so they could stay, share meals and discussions make blockades, see themselves and be seen. It did generate a non-hierarchical and yet efficient dynamic.

On the qualitative side, Jatteau (2019) makes an analogy with the printing technique, whose emergence gave the people access to reading, predicting that the internet could give the people access to writing. With the text, sound and video techniques, social media could allow those usually feeling illegitimate with writing and speaking publicly to express their views.

This feeling of illegitimacy is indeed a crucial aspect as Fraser's theory shows it. It suggests that as it is impossible to bracket social inequalities in the ideal public sphere and, thus, allow everyone to speak 'as if' all are equals. It is necessary, then, to have such competing spaces where the once stigmatized can emancipate themselves. Paradoxically enough, Facebook was used as one competing space.

Acquiring Political Codes and Skills to Reach the Public Sphere

In this competing space, people, usually distant from political public sphere, were able to build some political skills. They had to do so without the help of established organizations, such as political parties or unions. These were absent and not really welcomed. A kind of reciprocal distrust was pervasive.

These characteristics had two consequences, both making the learning more difficult and stimulating creativity.

The most difficult part was that of acquiring the knowledge of the political mechanics and codes, and the appropriate language and attitudes. For Bedock *et al* (2019), the roundabouts were spaces where the sharing of knowledge on the political system could occur during the discussions, alongside the meetings and demonstrations. They could also take advantage of the knowledge of members of trade unions or political parties, who were participating to the movement but were in a breaking position towards their original organizations.

They acquired the gestures and attitudes that are expected from people intending to occupy the public arena, and learn to assume their commitment within their inner as well as with their outer circle of relationship (Bendali et al., 2019).

An important point is that the learnings could be put into practice immediately thanks to techniques available on social media. Hence, they could produce statements, discourses, and share and broadcast them easily, organize meetings, plan actions, make deliberations within one group and between groups.

On the other hand, the lack of political experience prompted the Yellow Vests to emancipate themselves from the customary registry of collective actions. Indeed, besides the regular blockades of traffics or toll roads and the protests, the Yellow Vests showed several pieces of innovation in terms of space occupation, time sequencing and of use of non-mainstream media. Thus, they built up huts on the roundabouts and made up monuments out of wooden pallets. They adopted the theatre act as a frame for each set of actions. From November 2018 to November 2019, 52 acts took place. They turned the safety yellow vest into a new lower-middle-class and low-class symbol. In the beginning, despised and ignored by mainstream media, they resorted to alternative or independent media. Unfortunately, some of those media are far from impartiality. Amongst them, let us cite RT and Sputnik funded by the Russian government thought broadcasting in French or Thinkerview crowdfunded and claiming its belonging to the hacking trend (Bedocks *et al*, 2019).

So, it can be said that they conceived the staging and a kind of aesthetic of their movement, but not without controversial aspects.

Nevertheless, all these strategies helped the Yellow Vests make their way through the public sphere. Curiosity arose in mainstream media, and soon members of the Yellow Vests were invited in television programmes where they could to publicize their stances.

Learning to Be a Strong Public

Managing the media codes, frame, agenda gave the Yellow Vests the means to promote and share their ideas. More than that, from a burst of anger, the movement was able to grow in numbers and in thinking. Despite the heterogenous composition of the Yellow Vests, as some were close to the far right-wing others to the far left-wing, and some others had no overt or conscious political connections, they were able to build a cohesive and coherent discourse. One dimension of this discourse deals with economic issues, the other one with the critique of the political system. Besides, they took a special attention to deepen their own democratic functioning.

The first asset of their discourse was to make visible the social suffering within parts of the French population. It allowed people, usually considered as 'subalterns', to express and share their narratives (Lefebvre, 2019). For instance, various quantitative studies show that women

were very present in this movement compared to others (Bendali and Rubert, 2020). This is explained by the fact that women form a great part of the most vulnerable people, and those hit by the harder social and economic context. These women belonged to single-parent or lower-class households. So, they were in the front line facing the deteriorating of their purchasing power and seeing the worsening of the family life conditions. Besides, scanning the professional fields, the quantitative studies also show that most of the Yellow Vests were going through degrading working conditions due to the discontinuity of working periods and to the strong dependence on the car for moving. Indeed, amongst the Yellow Vests, men were craftsmen, blue-collar workers, truck drivers; women were care workers, even nurses, maids.

Thus, fighting the withdrawal of the welfare state can be seen as a first line of convergence in the Yellow Vests' claims.

Their strategies of communication and action were a success in this regard as the French government was forced to set up an emergency plan amounting to 10 billions of euros which provided :

- the cancelling of the carbon tax rise on oil,
- the cancelling of the social contribution tax on small pensions,
- the rise of the activity bonus for minimum wages,
- the exemption of tax for overtime working hours and favouring low incomes and small pensions.

This was the end of December 2018. The Yellow Vests with no mediation from any trade unions or political parties or any established organization, thanks to their organization, deliberations and actions had been able to impose their frame, their agenda and finally their propositions. In this sense, we can say they had become a strong public.

So much so, the movement did not stop with this success.

Alongside the economics' issues, the Yellow Vests had started a critical examination of the French political system. The movement had raised awareness within a very short period of time, from November to December 2018. So, it can be said that the movement was an acceleration factor for the learning of politics as well as the development of objectivity (Bedocks *et al.*, 2019). The Yellow Vests were willing to continue their action and their project was a more participative democracy. The great national discussion (*grand débat national*) proposed by the French government in January 2019 did not meet their goals.

One main critique on the representativeness was that it seemed confiscated by the elites, not connected to the basis and not transparent enough in the deliberation procedures.

In short, their claims encompassed three main points. First, safeguards had to be determined to keep the control on the representative delegates, even dismiss them if they fail their electorate. Secondly, the delegates had to act as spokespersons of their electors. Thirdly, the Citizen referendum initiative (*Référendum d'initiative citoyenne*) was also part of the propositions.

At fall 2019, after several demonstrations where, unfortunately, some violent incidents took place, none of the Yellow Vests propositions had been put on the parliament's agenda. After one year of gatherings from local to national levels and general assemblies, the movement seemed to slow down. Amongst the reasons of this slowing down, we find some disagreements regarding the future strategies. Some wanted to transform the movement in a political party, choose leaders and present candidates to national or European elections. Others, the majority, wanted to perpetuate the horizontal participative system they had settled. The first solution was

rejecting what they had fought for until now. The second one was hardly feasible without permanent structures. Indeed, in April, then in June 2019, the Assembly of assemblies accounted for 700 hundred delegates, representing 235 groups throughout France (Lefebvre, 2019).

So, after the acceleration process of learning and developing, the movement seemed to enter a declining phase.

DISCUSSION

Relying on quantitative and qualitative data provided by previous research studies, Fraser's theory appears relevant to better describe and understand the learning dynamics of the Yellow Vests' movement, thanks to social media and, with its interaction with governmental and political environments.

Moreover, if most articles questioned whether this movement was good or bad, that is to say grand and connected to the French republican motto '*Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité*', or petty and linked to populism. With Fraser's theory, we can answer neither this nor that, and furthermore, this is not even the main issue.

Fraser's theory gives keys to have a better view on what the public sphere should be, one which is less transcendental, not making 'as if' inequalities could be dissolved in abstraction, as 'deliberation can serve as mask for domination' (Fraser, 1990, p. 64). In this logic, the subaltern counterpublics' specific interests become a way to shake the 'as if' order and its tendency to domination and exclusion. This is what the Yellow Vests did, urging to pay attention to their degrading life and working conditions. As the feminist movements, Fraser mentioned, they shaped a new form of communication and action, allowing them to express their needs and identities. The consideration of the specific needs of counterpublics does not mean Fraser encourages separatism. On the contrary, first, it might be a step in a process, and second, in so far as the process is bound to be public, it is 'by definition not enclaves' (Fraser, 1990, p. 67). Furthermore, for Fraser, counterpublics, even subaltern ones, are not virtuous by nature. She underlined that some of them, 'alas, are, explicitly anti-democratic and anti-egalitarian; and even those with democratic and egalitarian intentions are not always above practicing their own modes of informal exclusion and marginalization' (Fraser, 1990, p. 67). In this respect, we could see that the Yellow Vests had dubious characteristics as far right and far left trends could be noticed in their ranks. However, the competing sphere they established forced them to some objectivity, at least for a while. Besides the economic measures they obtained, their need for participatory parity, whatever the status of people, engaged them into a wider public sphere.

This is, indeed, the main issue: the path to a wider public sphere, with as many diverse counterpublics as possible, sounds like one of the best safeguards of the democratic dynamics. Moreover, we can see that however complex it is, learning processes can be structured and accelerated through social media to achieve this wider sphere. In this logic, the disintermediation process analysed by Lefebvre (2019) is not any more a disadvantage but a factor to possible counterpublics emergence.

CONCLUSION

In this study, we could see that the Yellow Vests' movement could be analysed through the lens of Nancy Fraser's theory, thus having a wider and deeper political perspective. It seems that we

could both approach the learning stages and processes of the public sphere and project the movement on the wider screen of the political possible evolution.

As for the future of the Yellow Vests' movement, though some of them appear from time to time in various events, the dynamic does not seem to resume. Yet, the movement is still very vivid in the collective mind.

Meanwhile, other movements are emerging in France, such as The Popular primary, 'La *Primaire Populaire*'. It seems to follow the same pattern of disintermediation, using social media intensively, learning the public sphere. Within a few months, The Popular primary was able to gather half a million people and organize a competing vote to that of the established political parties. Whether it succeeds or not, this kind of action opens at least significant competing spheres. Citizens cannot not seize it. Established organizations cannot ignore it. This anticipates more research.

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