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# **Politicization and publicization: The fragile effects of deliberation in working-class districts**

Marion Carrel

## **Abstract**

A deep understanding of the use of deliberative processes requires a political ethnography able to detect their consequences for the participants and for the public sphere. This article analyses a participatory process organized in France by an activist-professional facilitator with a small group of bureaucrats and marginalised individuals, designed to promote mutual understanding and raise public issues. This ethnography shows that deliberation in small groups, rather than merely producing consensus and reproducing inequalities in accessing forms of public expression as is sometimes alleged, may generate at least preliminary politicization and the publicization of social issues in working-class districts. These rather fragile effects raise the question of the continuity of collective action and institutional transformations generated by deliberative processes.

## **Keywords**

deliberation, politicization, publicization, conflict, counter-power

## **Author's biography**

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Eliasoph, University of Southern California), published by ENS Editions in 2013. She also co-edited, with Catherine Neveu, *Citoyennetés ordinaires. Une approche renouvelée des pratiques citoyennes*, Paris, Ed. Karthala, 2014. [marion.carrel@free.fr]

## 1. Introduction

What are the virtues of deliberation for citizens and for the *res publica* in the sphere of social housing, where people tend to remain – or are kept – at the margins of political engagement, often marked by the stigma of immigration, socio-professional precariousness or a suspected lack of interest in the common good, even to the point of not sharing civic values? [The theory of democratic politics assumes](#) that deliberation improves the quality and legitimacy of public decisions while producing ‘better citizens’ by redefining individual preferences in a more collective and political sense (Talpin, 2011). In this way participation and deliberation [help](#) underpin social and political empowerment, and [give rise to](#) more effective public action (Fung, 2004; Briggs, 2008). Yet some observers argue that the rather unilateral and condescending ‘injunction to participate’ in fact deprives groups of such individuals of the ability to act as citizens, to discuss the mechanisms of institutions, whilst at the same time legitimating cuts in public spending.<sup>1</sup> The ethnography of deliberative processes with marginalised members of society takes us beyond this binary confrontation, and allows us to describe how urban, economic and social problems can be discussed in the public sphere. It informs us about the experience of inhabitants who take part in, or avoid, the definition and evaluation of public policies which concern them directly.

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<sup>1</sup> Eliasoph shows how the ‘language of empowerment’ can paradoxically reinforce stigmatization, when the issues or hardships of individuals are publicly displayed in their presence, in order to justify action and funding (Eliasoph, 2011). Briggs also warns that ‘In some instances, citizen or community action has become a substitute, or shock absorber, for needed government and market action, for example to reduce inequalities in income or safeguard workers and the environment’ (Briggs, 2008, p. 10).

This broadening of the scope of deliberation can help when exploring the proportions and spheres of citizenship. Its relational and territorial dimensions appear when we study people acting at different levels and with different collective forms of behaviour, following an anthropological approach (Clarke, Coll, Dagnino & Neveu, 2013). This understanding of citizenship can also benefit from the pragmatist study of the processes of publicization. In other words, collective enquiries help make the public visible and give it an active form, and bring issues into the public arena (Dewey, 1927). What happens when ordinary marginalized citizens are part of this process of publicization, alongside politicians, journalists, and public authorities?

There are four main issues at stake here. First, the question of deliberation and poverty is linked to the issue of conflict and dissent in citizenship. Rancière argues that impoverished people are practically without power in institutional arenas of consensual discussion, and only experience empowerment when conflicts emerge, and their 'mésentante' (disagreement) becomes visible in the public sphere (Rancière, 1995). When participation activists try to organize and maintain conflict in deliberative processes, are we dealing with a new form of counter-power? The second issue is the linkage between deliberation in small groups and in the public space of democracy. Studies of deliberation generally focus on the model of discussion in small groups, among a small-scale public, to the extent that this approach has been accused of 'abandoning mass democracy to its own devices' (Chambers, 2009). If empowerment and publicization processes can work in small groups, do they evaporate when the participation activist is no longer present? In other words, is the politicization experienced by impoverished people in a small-scale public artificial or sustainable? The third issue is the relationship between deliberation, participation and representation (Sintomer, 2011). The figure of the associational representative can easily lose contact with the language of those they represent, thus making the figure of the inhabitant appear more authentic in contrast,

with the risk that the collective voice is likely to go unheard. Can deliberative practices mediate effectively in a process of politicization in opening up the interest of the *res publica* or constituting an effective space for broader political activity and activism? The fourth issue concerns knowledge and power, and the role of language in empowerment processes (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2006). Knowledge is a form of power and a person's social position determines whether or not they have access to the language of institutions, to official, legitimate speech (Bourdieu, 1982). Those who do not possess this language tend to be reluctant, and to express themselves in a clumsy or violent way; at any rate institutions never listen to what they say. Do deliberative practices manage to ensure that institutions listen and understand the dominated, so that the latter acquire power?

Methodologically speaking the challenge is to conduct observations that allow us to analyze the effects of deliberation whilst at the same time encouraging a dialogue between description and theory, and with a view to understanding the empirical and normative complexity of 'deliberation'. Political ethnography opens up a range of fruitful avenues for research (Luhtakallio & Eliasoph, 2014). It allows us to monitor the emergence of public issues and the variation of regimes of speech and action according to specific interactional contexts, while at the same time helping to preserve an interest in structural data. This allows us to avoid the pitfalls of two extremes: a wholesale reliance on empiricism, i.e. the description of specific cases without the opportunity of drawing conclusions; and the 'all things normative' approach, i.e. the systematic reduction of observation to considerations of what ought to be 'good deliberation.'<sup>2</sup> As an example of this approach, Berger's ethnography of participatory assemblies in Brussels drew up a typology of the failures of 'citizens' talk' in these meetings, while at the same time analyzing the

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<sup>2</sup> This reflects the need to formulate sociological analyses of the deliberative process that challenges the deliberative ideal and try to establish links between the investigative approach and the normative approach (Barnes, Newman & Sullivan, 2007).

‘internal resistance’ that ordinary citizens can develop in public assemblies (Berger, 2015).

The analysis presented here is based on the ethnography of a procedure to facilitate access to critical forms of expression directed at the common good for people from working-class districts. Within the sphere of highly heterogeneous deliberative practices currently developing in France, a small number of agents located at the intersection between the professional sphere and political activism play a central role. Their experiences, which date back to the 1970s, have tended to outline the contours of maieutic deliberative activity – that is, activity designed to bring participants’ own views and aims into clearer focus. The deliberation involved in these interventions tends to take place in small working groups of local inhabitants and professionals (e.g. teachers, social workers, police). This involves processes carried out in a country where the rules of democracy are firmly rooted in a representative and centralized system. The participatory process is thus focused more on cooperation and deliberation than on an effective sharing of decision-making powers. However, these experiments (in Dewey’s sense of the term as the activity of enquiring into ‘what the state could or should be’)<sup>3</sup> are designed to encourage state employees and citizens to put social and political reality to the test in public arenas. They are also designed to ensure that minorities acquire greater power over their own lives and their own environments – in short, encouraging a shift from ‘noise to talk’ among residents and tenants living in these areas. We can therefore expect that such experiments will have an impact on decisions made by those in power. But how, and to what extent, does this work in practice? What are the tensions and ambiguities that emerge from applying deliberative procedures?

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<sup>3</sup> ‘The formation of states must be an experimental process (...) It is not the business of philosophy and political science to determine what the state in general could or should be. What they can do is to help elaborate methods such that the experimentation process can be conducted less blindly according to mechanisms that are less liable to accidents, and more intelligently, in such a way that men may learn from their mistakes and derive benefits from their successes’ (Dewey, 1927).

In response to these questions, I present a micro-analysis of the construction of political claims in an empowerment workshop<sup>4</sup> observed over a period of a year. The aim was to bring the local population and professionals together for twelve days in order to encourage them to articulate proposals for improving public services. In the case observed here in a working-class [area in](#) the suburbs of Grenoble, Clamoire,<sup>5</sup> applicants for social housing met salaried employees working for public housing agencies head-on. This method was championed by Suzanne Rosenberg, a former social development worker.<sup>6</sup> [It included the preparation of the group before the twelve days of workshop activity](#), persuading the institutional representative to organize public debates before and after the work of the group and arguing for the financial compensation of the marginalised inhabitants. The methodological approach used [during the preparation and the twelve days of workshop](#), spread out over a period of six months, was observation, with a limited participatory status (I was in charge of the session's reports). In order to determine the effects of this action, I returned six months later to observe meetings between inhabitants and to conduct interviews with the thirteen participants from the group (six inhabitants and seven professionals), as well as with members of housing associations and local authority responsible for social housing.

This experience was chosen among six 'participation-building' methods I had observed.<sup>7</sup> All these are exceptional in the professional realm of participation in

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<sup>4</sup> The French name for the participatory method is 'qualification mutuelle', which refers to co-learning between inhabitants and professionals, and can either be called a 'co-learning workshop' or an 'empowerment workshop'.

<sup>5</sup> [The name has been changed, as have the names of some of the participants.](#)

<sup>6</sup> For an analysis of the trajectory of this 'professional-activist' in participation since the 1970s, see Rosenberg and Carrel, 2002.

<sup>7</sup> This article presents some of the results of my doctoral thesis in sociology (Carrel, 2013). The study focused on six teams of activists-professionals of participatory democracy operating in working-class areas (*Arpenteurs*, *ATD Quart Monde*, *Compagnie Naje*, *Qualification mutuelle*, *Moderniser sans exclure*, *Université(s) du citoyen*). Here, the analysis is limited to *Qualification mutuelle*, because a greater quantity of empirical material was available on the processes of politicization and publicization.

France, working to help violence give way to democratic confrontation and social justice, and to question the legitimacy of institutions. The decision to focus on the Clamoire story of the empowerment workshop that dealt with procedures governing the allocation of social housing is chiefly motivated by its exemplary status: it had more consequences for publicization and decision-making than other similar workshops that I have observed (Carrel, 2013). An ecological approach to citizenship was used so that beyond the focus on procedure, we could grasp the complexity of social networks, political logic, and the militant and institutional contexts in which participatory mechanisms are created.<sup>8</sup> This research specifically monitored the progress of one young woman, Lila, a French citizen of Algerian origin, and an applicant for social housing. The use of the experience of a single named individual, dovetailed with other findings from the fieldwork, functions to some extent as a guide to a larger structure of awareness.<sup>9</sup> This article begins by addressing the effects of this deliberative experience on Lila, before considering its (more fragile and contrasting) effects on the process of decision-making.

## **2. From violence to argued conflict: the deliberative experience**

The first session began at 9 o'clock in the morning. People arrived on time, some of them knew each other and exchanged a few words while having a coffee and sitting in a circle of chairs and tables in the meeting room provided by the city hall. The workshop was not opened by an official but by Rosenberg and her colleague who spent the first session getting to know the group. They explained that one applicant for social housing was unable to come, because of family problems. Among the six

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<sup>8</sup> See Carrel, Cefai and Talpin, 2012. While pragmatism and anthropology oppose the idea of researching ready-made empowerment methods, the rather limited interest in reflection on participatory expertise in France, especially when compared with practices in Quebec or the United States, suggests a need for enquiry that could benefit from ethnographic research.

<sup>9</sup> Eliasoph gives an example of this with the case of Eleanor, an ecologist activist whose speech appears more 'public spirited' in private discussions than in the public arena, in front of journalists or politicians (Eliasoph, 1998).

applicants, there were five women and one man, five people with name with consonance from the Maghreb and one from Portugal. Among the seven professionals, there were four officials from public housing agencies, two officials from the city hall and one employee of a tenant's union. The professionals, who were all volunteers, took part in their working time. The applicants for social housing were contacted via [local associations](#) and [social workers](#), or by mail from the city hall, inviting them to a public meeting. [This initial meeting had been held the evening before the official start of the workshop, at the end of which seven inhabitants, all unemployed, had volunteered to take part.](#) Without mentioning this at the public meeting, Rosenberg had negotiated a financial compensation with the Mayor – a voucher which was the equivalent of the SMIC<sup>10</sup> for twelve days' work. The participants only learnt of this remuneration on the morning of the first session. Rosenberg presented [this as a recognition](#) of the inhabitants' ability to co-construct the general interest, but also as compensation for their presence at all the sessions.<sup>11</sup>

The first days were devoted to 'getting the group going'. First, the group's goal was presented and discussed: [producing](#) an information leaflet on the application process for social housing, which is particularly complex and unclear in France, [in the light both of participants' experiences and the text of the law.](#) Rosenberg then stipulated [the](#) four working rules: regular attendance, confidentiality, friendly confrontation (without fear of creating conflict), and finally 'no swearwords' (technical terms and abbreviations could not be used without being explained first). This last rule, which was difficult for the professionals at the start, led to crazy laughter in the sessions: everyone enjoyed spotting the 'swearwords' and interrupting the speaker saying 'Wait a minute! What does that mean?'

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<sup>10</sup> The SMIC (*Salaire Minimum de Croissance*) is a minimum hourly wage in France.

<sup>11</sup> Our observations of Rosenberg's work are based on various sources: direct observation of the workshop and how it was organized, informal preparatory discussion with her, reading her articles and reports, and our joint publication on this method, *Face à l'insécurité* (Rosenberg & Carrel, 2002).

This was followed by exercises intended to create a friendly atmosphere,<sup>12</sup> and to initiate dialogue. For example, for the 'cross-presentations', pairs of participants, one housing applicant and one professional, exchanged views for half an hour so that each was able to present the other to the group using 'I' in their place. The housing applicant had to sum up their housing application, from the day it was filed to the present day. The professional had to explain exactly what they did. These cross-presentations took place throughout the first two days, interrupted by misunderstandings, questions, expressions of discontent and tentative debate.

One by one, the participants 'got things off their chest' and expressed their powerlessness, anger or sense of injustice. The cross-presentation that Paul, a public housing official, had with Lila, ended by her engaging more. Lila is a twenty-seven-year-old French citizen of Algerian origin, unemployed, with a young son, who had been applying for social housing for two years. In the absence of any detailed explanations, she believed that her application had been 'blocked' by Mme Martin, the manager of housing services. Lila describes swinging between resignation and anger, and talks of her impression that she has been personally ignored in the race for housing:

I've been waiting two years! I'm staying at my parents', with my son, who's two years and nine months now... At my parents' it's tough – they've got a three-bedroomed flat, and my older brother lives there as well... For months, every week I've tried to get information, I've called the housing service: 'Let me speak to Mme Martin', 'No you can't'. So I said to myself, OK, they've blocked my application, they've just forgotten about me... In the end I just gave up and accepted my fate, and I said t\*

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<sup>12</sup> Conviviality is indeed part of the process. The participants did not just debate housing during the twelve days. There were plenty of moments of relaxation during exercises inspired by the 'theatre of the oppressed' and coffee breaks. There were informal conversations during the lunch breaks, all together at the municipal canteen.

o myself that I wouldn't call them anymore, I just wouldn't do anything about it anymore... (Lila, during the first day of the group)

This release of repressed emotions in public, or catharsis,<sup>13</sup> had the effect of relieving individuals and causing debate on the behaviour of each, and their rights and duties, laws and regulations. But this takes time, and what dominated this first day in the group was incomprehension. The two sides faced each other: the applicants and the professionals. Some professionals even questioned Lila's honesty and defended the professionalism of Mme Martin. Throughout the discussion, the debate became heated and a professional accused all the applicants: 'It looks like you're only here for your own personal interest, your own housing!' Other professionals said that they felt under attack both by their superiors and by the applicants. Lila and the other applicants were disappointed to see that their stories were not believed, and that they were seen as aggressive and selfish. At the debriefing on the first day, a potential tenant explained his disappointment: 'My morale was low because of what I heard. I no longer have any illusions.'

It was by a slow elaboration of narratives on both sides, particularly, as we shall see, of a collective investigation of the history of Lila's dossier, that anger and incomprehension gradually gave way to an awareness by each side of the institutional dysfunctions and more widely of the political dimension of the problem.

## 2.1 Empowerment

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<sup>13</sup> The catharsis allowed them to release repressed feelings and to distance themselves [from them](#), thanks to the presence of a third party or spectator who was listening and could formulate their view of the facts (Ricoeur, 1983). For example, this might happen when the tenant and the agent of the social landlord [violently disagreed on a story, and then](#) tell the same story in different ways, [which become progressively](#) acceptable to both parties. [The process of catharis allows us to](#) control, objectify, study and understand the [feelings: violence can give way to conflict](#).

At a normative level, the observation of a participatory procedure suggests a range of effects on participants that could be termed 'positive'. In schematic terms, people can shift from 'silence' (self-exclusion from public debate or violent forms of expression) to the expression of a critical voice, which is a product of their position within an argued conflict. How does this work, and to what extent does it contribute to the debate sparked by Bernard Manin concerning the effects of deliberation in small groups (Manin, 2011)?

For Manin, the crucial issue in a democracy is to ensure that both sides of the argument are presented to all citizens to help them develop their own views. In this sense, collective deliberation in the form of discussion in small groups is not particularly relevant, and may even be undesirable, since it tends to overcome disagreements, resolve conflicts and reinforce points of view already held; in other words it diminishes disputation in democracy (Manin, 2011). The fact that social inequality affects access to the means of public expression is one of the arguments he cites. Indeed, critical public expression requires skills that are distributed unequally across society: shifting from the singular in favour of a discourse that can be shared by all. Actors need to be able to objectify their experiences and to use a language of detached commitment that must be neither too general nor too personal (Cardon, Heurtin & Lemieux, 1995). Because socially-dominated individuals may not have the skills to manage the rhetorically-successful expression of disagreement, for Manin, the quality of deliberation is improved by ensuring that opposing arguments are presented to them, and not by asking for their opinions in small groups.

Yet this solution to social inequality in accessing public means of expression is flawed for two reasons. First of all, social issues such as 'gratuitous' violence perpetrated against counter clerks in social housing or resignation in job-seeking may not be publicly addressed, either because they appear to be incomprehensible or because they are conceived unilaterally, i.e. without alternative arguments being made available within the public arena (Dewey, 1927). This is the case in relation to

culturalist-type assertions, such as 'People on housing estates are dangerous,' or 'The unemployed don't want to work.' The analysis of complex social issues is liable to be biased if a proportion of the actors are unable to find any means of expression, or where their views are undermined by their lack of appropriate language skills in expressing detached commitment. In other words, many opposing arguments concerning life in disadvantaged areas are simply not available in the public debate: deliberation processes (but also riots and strikes) may help construct them.

Secondly (and this applies to all social categories), the mere fact of voicing contradictory arguments publicly may not be enough to elicit interest in the public good. An interest in public affairs is also, perhaps above all else, stimulated when personal concerns and views are connected with problems such as social issues and questions of social justice or labour organization – a process that may be facilitated by deliberative activity. Interests and moral feelings are thus no longer conceived as insignificant personal biases, but as part of the process of deliberation (Mansbridge *et al.*, 2010; Polanyi, 1983).

In view of these questions and in the light of practical research, it appears that under certain conditions, deliberation in small groups may have two significant effects on participants in working-class districts: an increase in the power of local people and the onset of politicization.

The empowerment workshop provides an illustration. Over a period of six months, Lila, Mme Martin and the rest of the group engaged in an exchange of personal accounts and an inquiry into the procedures governing the allocation of social housing. In the first public meeting organized the day before the start of the workshop Lila reacted with violence. Nearly thirty social housing applicants were present and several of them had rough words to say about the social housing service, accusing politicians and civil servants both of being racist and of lying to them:

We are buffeted from side to side, it's not normal to have to knock on fifteen doors to get information or just the confirmation of our application. Somehow, you are lying about my record. I live in 'Les Îlots' and want to change area. One lady told me: 'Yes, it's possible, send us your papers,' but when Mme Martin came back: 'Well no, it's not possible'. And then I thought, but honestly, you think we're idiots! (Lila at the first public meeting)

Lila believed that her application had been blocked. The public meeting was an opportunity for her to express her anger. Her story is an example of a 'self-fulfilling prophecy' in relations between tenants of social housing institutions and neighbourhoods (Merton, 1948). Professionals fail to provide information, or give contradictory information, because the procedure itself is complex and opaque. Housing applicants swing between rage and resignation, without breaking the cycle of the self-fulfilling prophecy.

When Lila told her story in the workshop the next day, it triggered suspicion, and then questions. Why couldn't Lila get more information about her application? Did she fill in her application form properly? Do the public housing agencies block applications? Who decides the allocation of housing? Are there quotas? Why doesn't Mme Martin give more information? It turned out that Lila's application was incomplete, but she was unaware of this because nobody had told her so. The reasons for this failure in communication were examined throughout the second day: a professional explained how an application can be considered incomplete without this information getting back to the applicant. Both groups came to realize that there existed no written document explaining the procedure, and the rights and obligations of each party. There is no office to go to: when the application is filed, the applicant cannot make an appointment. When an applicant is worried about the state of their application, there is only the possibility of telephone contact, and generally

the reply is 'If the application is valid, you will receive a letter,' but the applicant is still not informed if their application is valid or not! The participants agreed on the fact that this state of affairs created problems. Professionals realized that a waiting period of several months without knowing who is really taking the decision, nor how or why the decision is made, is an untenable situation for social housing applicants. The administrative staff in the group had not previously perceived things like this. Now they understood the reasons for frequent aggressive behaviour at counters. This is not just because interaction with Lila and other applicants in the group made them more sympathetic: the inquiry actually revealed professional dysfunctions.

The enquiry was then broadened to cover the overall process of applying for social housing. It emerged that while the local council collects applications for social housing and decides on a pre-selection together with local councillors, the final decision is in fact made by public housing agencies. Applicants for social housing were thus gradually made aware that Mme Martin was merely a single link in a long chain of decision-makers. Issues relating to the inadequate supply of social housing, especially in wealthy local councils, and the opacity of granting procedures, were debated and compared with the information provided by the representatives of public housing agencies and the local council. For example, on the fourth day, two state representatives came to explain how the measures for housing the most disadvantaged worked. Even some of the professionals had not known this in detail. The group came to be more aware of the shortage of social housing: there are 12,000 applications waiting for the urban area, only 2,500 allocations a year and very few are reserved for the poorest: in the city, the year before, only three flats for the most deprived were allocated by the state programme! A discussion followed on the reluctance of mayors to build new social housing. The inhabitants now realized that

some towns in the urban area possessed little or no social housing, despite the existence of a law mandating this.<sup>14</sup>

At the end of the workshop, Lila criticized the opacity of the allocation process and the inadequate provision of social housing in the area, in the presence of a management committee present at a public meeting. Over a period of six months, Lila and the other participants had shifted from 'suffering in silence' ('I am a victim of racism'/'They don't want to give me housing') to 'We have rights' ('As applicants for social housing, we demand explanations from elected representatives and administrative authorities'). For example, on the eighth day of the group, representatives from Habitat, a service in the urban area, came to answer the group's questions. Lila spoke up: 'There are towns that don't respect the law, that haven't got 20% social housing. Why not organise intercommunity workshops to find housing? That could help us, and show that we all know what's going on.' Thus, the empowerment workshop is a public sphere in which individuals can break out of the vicious circle of apathy and violence.<sup>15</sup> This potential comes from the work of examining conflicting or confusing situations; individuals can feel validated and able to express their experience of reality.<sup>16</sup> According to the American political theorist Hanna Pitkin, public discourse occurs when citizens speak in terms of justice. They go from 'I want' to 'we want' to 'I am entitled to' or 'we are entitled to', i.e. to a demand that is negotiable by public and legally recognized standards (Pitkin, 1981). Without this type of discourse, individuals are unable to engage in the collective elaboration of a project, opinion or desire concerning communal life in society.

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<sup>14</sup> In France, the law *Solidarité et renouvellement urbain* of 13 December 2000 introduced a minimum threshold of 20% social housing for cities with over 3,500 inhabitants (1,500 for the Ile-de-France) in urban areas with at least 50,000 inhabitants. This threshold was raised to 25% by the law of 18 January 2013, but some cities prefer to pay a fine rather than build social housing.

<sup>15</sup> Violence combined with impotence tends to reduce isolated individuals to beings who are 'voiceless and wordless' (Arendt, 1958).

<sup>16</sup> Revisiting Hegel, Ricoeur has stressed the importance of 'mutual recognition' between individuals, an essential step in the transition from asymmetry to reciprocity in relationships with others (Ricoeur, 2004).

The process illustrates what North Americans refer to as empowerment, a concept which first emerged during the black emancipation movements in the United States. When it is related to the question of recognition and self-esteem, it has political, social and social-psychological dimensions. Empowerment is an ambivalent notion insofar as it refers both to the autonomous organization of the destitute, immigrants and other 'voiceless' groups into a political force, and to the public policies designed to develop their capacity for self-expression. The term '*capacitation*', a French neologism borrowed from Latin-American scholarship (*capacitação*), is frequently used to refer to empowerment on the international stage and among activists promoting participatory democracy in working-class areas. This translation has been criticized on the grounds that it leaves aside the question of political power and social conflicts by implying a shift towards a 'capaciting' (*capacitaire*) vision of democracy, i.e. citizenship requires skills that are unequally shared and distributed in society (Bacqué & Biewener, 2013). More recently in France, the expression '*développement du pouvoir d'agir*' has been preferred by actors and researchers, insisting more on the acquisition of power rather than on the learning process required to access it.

Yet this learning process plays an important role in this kind of empowerment workshop. There is a gradual deconstruction of rumours and hearsay in favour of a debate between conflicting views on the meaning of work, the behaviour of different individuals and the economic, social and political implications of the subject under study. Participants engage in debates over racism and police brutality because local residents do not denounce drug dealers whom they know. In short, they engage in discussions about the 'desirable' behaviour of local people as agents of public services. In the work sessions observed here, the empowerment process was initiated on the basis of life stories that frequently involved feelings of contempt and injustice.

This debate between several conflicting viewpoints, and held behind closed doors,<sup>17</sup> favoured a shift from silence to critique in agents who had very little previous experience of expressing themselves in public on issues of communal life. The participants thus emerge as citizens who are deeply wary of official representatives. Pierre Rosanvallon draws a distinction between three modalities of 'citizen vigilance', which he traces back to the French revolution: surveillance (the permanent control of society and its representatives), denunciation (the pursuit of scandals and corruption), and evaluation (auditing and expertise) (Rosanvallon, 2006). Laure, a social housing applicant, provides another example of an increase in citizen vigilance (through deliberation) among people living in working-class areas. Quoted below is her response to a question asked by Rosenberg about changes noted by participants since the previous session:

Since the last session I have allowed myself to criticize a questionnaire which the employment agency asked me to fill in (...). I had never cast a critical eye, be it negative or positive, on social work. Now I really don't mind speaking my mind when I feel something is wrong. At the employment agency, I said: 'This isn't right.' That's what's changed for me. (Laure at the last session)

While a posture of vigilance may not bring about a radical change in the relations between citizens and those who govern them, it does provide citizens with the means of inquiring into the workings of the administrative and political spheres. By appearing not as 'beggars' but as citizens with rights who require accountability from public authorities, people living in working-class areas who engage in this type of deliberative experience derive a degree of dignity from questioning institutional practices. Their status as citizens is thus acknowledged by the group and its public

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<sup>17</sup> The degree of privacy involved in the process is relative. This empowerment workshop used various types of publicization (written reviews, oral overviews of proposals made by members of the group) that meant shifting between private working periods and publicizing the results of deliberation.

(Lila was interviewed by the local TV, and Yacine was interviewed by the local newspaper). It is possible that this acknowledgment is also sought by the officials concerned, who do not want to be perceived solely as administrative authorities, but as sincere individuals displaying 'authenticity'.<sup>18</sup> For example, Mme Martin was affected by Lila's criticism and the discussion that followed, but was able to talk about the problems of her job, trapped between public housing agencies with various opaque procedures, and the demands, at times aggressive, of applicants. 'We didn't know that your job was so difficult, now we realize that you're a person just like us,' said the inhabitants, who had until then perceived her as just an inflexible bureaucrat, without feelings.

## **2.2 The beginnings of politicization**

The practice among participation professionals like Rosenberg is to focus on the way in which local residents who do not usually express themselves in public in the name of a collective, community or neighbourhood can be given a voice. In this respect, the figure of the 'professional resident' – a regular participant in public meetings who has lost their lay status and who may often resist access to inquiries on the parts of others who are still without a voice – appears to be a significant obstacle. For the same reasons, representatives of associations and political militants are also encouraged to break, if necessary, with modes of expression centring on self-defence, on accentuating features that distinguish them from their rivals. Rosenberg considers that delegating power to representatives – be they representatives elected by formal voting systems or presidents of associations – needs to be temporarily suspended in order to ensure that all individuals can discover their own powers as citizens capable of deliberating, criticizing and acting collectively in the name of the public good. She is in the end referring to the difference between the agonistic vision of democracy

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<sup>18</sup> Rui (2004) also highlights the need for an acknowledgment of authenticity and humanity by the developers and contractors involved in public debates over infrastructure projects.

(the 'organized other' against the 'organized us') and the deliberative vision, according to which every citizen must be capable of performing the functions of surveillance, vigilance and control of the *res publica*. Here, the first priority is to break away from the structured language of activism and to initiate a logic of co-production of inquiry, to produce a more distinctly pluralist diagnosis of the situation.

Yet this conception of democracy is itself a source of ambiguities and tensions. What is the effect of addressing isolated individuals rather than organized collectives?

[Does it help to avoid conflict?](#) Surely there is a risk that collective voices and collective commitment, as well as representatives, are likely to be undermined – in the end, risking depolitization? Based on their observations of a different urban workshop, some researchers have suggested that the figure of the association representative may be devalued by organizers, to the detriment of the figure of the inhabitant (Flanquart & Lafaye, 2001). The language used by facilitators was the 'profane' idiom of personal experience, rather than that of the informed and politically-active associational representative.

The observations made in this research show that there is no censorship by Rosenberg of collective speech and no refusal to engage with politically-organized groups. In fact, on the tenth day, the representatives of tenants' unions and associations for housing rights were invited to discuss with the group, and this tended to politicize the debate on the housing crisis even more strongly. But Rosenberg does censor the incomprehensible discourses which associative and political groups, as well as professionals and technicians, tend to use when they come face to face with citizens who have little experience of how public power and public authorities operate. She has at the same time promoted representatives and the function of representatives, and more specifically promoted the democratic nature of representation. For example, when the mayor attended on the fourth day, Rosenberg insisted on the fact that this was at the request of the group, which had

prepared questions to put to the mayor. The members of the group divided amongst them the roles of receiving representatives and stating objectives, time-keeping, regulating the order of speakers and taking notes. All these measures forced the mayor to listen and to think with the group, instead of coming out with ready-made replies. In other words, she does not reject representation so much as the anti-democratic nature of certain representatives who prevent the initiation of inquiries into the management of public affairs and extricate themselves from the demand to be accountable to, and to take account of, their voters or supporters. Nevertheless, this empowerment workshop remains at the heart of the tension between the rejection of delegation and the desire of citizens to contribute to decisions, which necessarily requires some form of long-term collective organization. Twelve days are obviously not enough to create this sort of collective action, and to politicize inhabitants and professionals in the long term.

The ambivalence of procedures of cooperation and consultation has been analyzed elsewhere in the scientific and technical literature (Callon & Lascoumes, 2001).

Participatory devices may both help to defuse controversy over a project and avoid generating pressure groups, while nonetheless [increasing](#) the 'debateability' of issues, highlighting conflicts and opening up the range of potential options of public action. To this extent, the exchange of arguments in small deliberative groups does not necessarily imply an absence of politicization in the sense of a specific stance in relation to the political arguments available within the public arena.

The observations made in the course of this research suggest a distinction between two degrees of politicization through deliberation. The first degree pertains to interest in the *res publica*, in opposing arguments articulated within the public arena. Fishkin and Ackerman evoke the history of a participant in a deliberative poll who had not previously read newspapers but who began to do so after his deliberative experience (Fishkin & Ackerman, 2004). In her interview with the local TV station,

Lila stated, 'Now I pay close attention to discussions with my friends on housing issues and I read the articles published in the local paper on housing.'

The second degree of politicization relates to a more marked degree of public commitment. A deliberative experience may constitute a space of socialization for collective action, and even a means of transition towards more political forms of commitment. Whereas the majority of those living in areas with social housing tend not to identify with the 'coded language' used by associations or political parties, their involvement in deliberative groups may allow the emergence of new questions and the social and political recognition of those questions. Lila was one of those who, following involvement in the social housing group, developed a desire to act to ensure a greater provision of social housing. Her desire was driven by a new-found awareness of injustice, of, in her words, 'things that make your blood boil':

What makes my blood boil is when we're told that the Council wants to build something in the town, on a strip of land that serves no purpose, but that the residents in the area around the strip of land, who are private homeowners, don't want the project to go ahead. So, to start with, that makes my blood boil. I say to myself, hang on a minute, there are people out there living on the street. Why? Because there are people who don't like the idea of having affordable social housing in their neighbourhood! So then I say to myself, I reckon that if all social housing applicants in the town were to vent their rage in demonstrations, that would be a way of opposing them. And I'm ready for action. Even if I do have housing now, given what I had to go through to get it, I really would get out there and make myself heard... (Lila, interview after the empowerment group)

Later in the group discussion, Lila remarked that her involvement in the group 'was like a wake-up call':

Getting involved in the empowerment workshop was like a wake-up call. Because I said to myself, I've got a place to live, I'm OK... But in this case I want to talk about it, I understand a lot [more] things now.

The metaphor of awakening used by Lila sums up the beginnings of politicization generated by involvement in a deliberative procedure. Yet it is worth asking whether the process of 'citizen awakening' is reflected in actions and discourses that actually change the process of political arbitration on housing and employment issues. What is the degree of continuity in the processes that have been initiated? Is deliberative experience articulated within developing patterns of more stabilized forms of political commitment? Beyond the level of the individual, what are the effects of these deliberative procedures on the public sphere and on the process of decision-making?

### **3. Publicization and counter-power: fragile and contrasting effects**

#### **3.1 A temporary form of deliberative counter-power**

Deliberative activity *a priori* takes a different trajectory from the notion of counter-power, since its point is more to exchange arguments and discuss with the authorities than to foster struggle against them. Yet in the conclusion to their collected volume, Fung and Wright set out to consider the emergence of 'deliberative' forms of counter-power alongside more traditional agonistic forms of counter-power (Fung & Wright, 2003). The latter are chiefly manifested in legal crusades, social movements and interest groups such as unions or political parties. The former, like the empowerment workshop observed here, take the shape of mixed groups that facilitate participatory negotiation, alternative methods of conflict

resolution and collective inquiry. They tend to be more distinctly rooted locally and operate on a more cooperative basis. They also involve commonly opposed actors such as ecologists and industrialists, and focus on the resolution of concrete issues. According to Fung and Wright, the efficiency of 'agonistic' forms of counter-power has become evident in vertical and top-down structures of governance. Yet such forms of counter-power have a hard time when it comes to addressing more complex social issues. The information at the heart of these forms of counter-power tends to be poorly circulated, while the level of decision-making, which tends to be poorly connected with them, is isolated from potential innovations and from the generation of equity. In participatory or deliberative structures of governance, decision-making is intended to be less technocratic and less isolated from local populations, thereby helping to make them more creative and more legitimate. For example, during the six months of the empowerment group's existence, the meetings that it had with politicians and local administrators, as well as the minutes of the enquiry it carried out, allowed the public authorities to measure the impact of some dysfunctional elements of their housing policies and to consider innovations, together with Rosenberg and the group. However, this evolution towards deliberative forms of counter-power may not be as evident as Fung and Wright claim. Institutional resistance limits deliberative processes,<sup>19</sup> particularly in a state-centred republican country such as France, where top-down governance prevails and participation is often reduced to mere consultation (Blondiaux, 2008).

In Clamoire, [at the time](#) when the empowerment workshop involving the users and agents of social housing was held, social housing applicants were not in a position to defend their rights. Clamoire [does](#) not have a local branch representing the most

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<sup>19</sup> As suggested for example in the British case, 'Institutional resistance effectively limits any meaningful exchange taking place between the public and relevant government bodies, and ultimately prevents any wholesale transformation of local outcomes' (Barnes, Newman & Sullivan, 2007, p. 31).

active national associations working for those with poor housing.<sup>20</sup> There is a local branch of the national confederation of housing, the *Confédération nationale du logement* (CNL) in the city, but its job is to deal with tenants, not applicants for housing. The shortage of social housing and the long waiting-lists are issues that are beyond its control. It is precisely the lack of organization among social housing applicants as a collective force capable of impacting on the power relationship involving elected representatives and public housing agencies that motivated the demand for a deliberative process by the co-director of the *Centre communal d'action sociale* (CCAS)<sup>21</sup>. As the person in charge of the department dealing with social housing applications, Celine Vermont, the co-director, explained her political objective to bring issues of social justice into the public arena:

The problem is that there is no-one to represent social housing applicants, a bit like for the unemployed a few years ago. Tenant associations only deal with those who already have accommodation. (...) But believe it or not, when you set up an empowerment workshop, it creates groups of tenants who meet up with angry applicants for social housing, and who want to defend them! And this gives us a second wind. Because social workers and managers like us make appeal after appeal and in the end we give up... Working with applicants helps to re-fire the process. When applicants themselves say: 'That's not right,' it makes you want to start appealing to everybody all over again. (Celine, Co-director of CCAS, interview)

Following this implicit objective, which had never previously been articulated in this way to her superiors or before the local council, Celine requested that a salaried employee of the CNL be involved in the experiment. Her hope was that in this way

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<sup>20</sup> Such as the *Fondation Abbé-Pierre* or *Droit au Logement*.

<sup>21</sup> In all French cities the CCAS is the state body responsible for implementing social policy.

the social housing applicants' cause would be heard and defended by the tenants' association. Celine's political objectives had an impact on the experiment and partly explain why it generated several organizational changes within the housing department. Indeed, the group produced a [leaflet](#) that explained the process of housing applications, the rights and duties of applicants, and information on the procedures and associations dealing with housing aid; it included a diagram and a glossary, all in 'easy French'. This document was printed and distributed throughout the city. Céline also focused on the group's demands and negotiated with her superiors to obtain more funding. The CCAS was thus able to open physical offices, where previously only hotlines had been used, and to organize collective meetings in the district. Encouraged by the CNL and the members of the group, these meetings were designed to get people out of their isolation, to give them information, and to make as many applicants for social housing as possible [aware of their rights](#).

Before the empowerment workshop, resignation and moral indignation tended to prevail, whereas now potential tenants/inhabitants and professionals had publicly expressed their criticism of [the state's provisions and behaviour](#). The workshop operated as a temporary form of deliberative counter-power on the issue of the allocation of social housing. The co-production of inquiry by users and social housing officials together into the conditions governing social housing's allocation helped to put the spotlight on the indirect effects of the housing shortage, thereby paving the way for its publicization.<sup>22</sup> After their twelve days of deliberation, the participants presented their proposals to a steering committee, made up of four representatives of the CCAS, a representative of the urban area, four representatives of the body in charge of social landlords, one representative of the CNL and a small group of local inhabitants and association representatives who attended the meeting on foot of an announcement in the local paper. Personal contributions ("This

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<sup>22</sup> The role of the inquiry in the configuration of public issues appears to be vital inasmuch as it helps to explore the complexity of reality (Dewey, 1927).

happened to me...') were used as evidence of and support for the general demonstration, not treated as selfish comments. During the entire process, a number of elements acted as publicity constraints (detailed records of discussions, intermediary oral reviews of the work, written or dramatized accounts of debates on the rights and duties of every actor). These constraints explain why the process of 'political evaporation', often observed when groups of people express themselves publicly, did not occur in this instance.<sup>23</sup>

### **3.2 Political exploitation and the absence of durability: the double pitfall of deliberative procedures**

Is this temporary form of deliberative counter-power enough to reverse significant tendencies such as the opacity of the mechanism governing the allocation of social housing and more generally the top-down governance processes that prevent the transformation of local outcomes? What are the political spaces available for effective citizen involvement and activity? Does the space offered here open up any genuine option for broader activity or is it just a question of consultative roles in contexts of frontline bureaucracies? Is the temporary nature of the experience its chief limitation?

Fung and Wright highlight the risk of 'angelism' that tends to surround any conception of participatory democracy if it is construed as a miracle cure for the ills that democracy currently suffers. In what they refer to as 'deliberative governance', the mechanisms of domination and political exploitation are likely to be reproduced

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<sup>23</sup> Based on an observation of American associations conducted by Eliasoph involving discussions in small committees and public debates, the political reach of residents' discourse tends to 'evaporate' (Eliasoph, 1998). There is a marked difference between the reach of residents' discourse in private (where discussions focus on 'society at large'), and in public (where the same members of the association tend to lose their ability to express themselves, feel inhibited about using the language of politics, and do not make arguments that are likely to be of general interest). Through the change in discursive regime involved, what is expressed in front of journalists and elected representatives becomes 'systematically less empathetic, less questioning, less open to public debate and focused on the public good than what is said in private, or merely whispered. Conversations about society at large or discussions driven by a sense of public spirit tend to evaporate' (*ibid.* p. 226).

in the absence of solid forms of countervailing power. Where counter-power is weak, they argue, 'the rules of deliberation tend to favour established interests that are already organized and highly concentrated' (Fung & Wright, 2003). This phenomenon may take the shape of restrictions on open questions to deliberation, a limitation on the number of participants or reducing the role of participatory groups to a merely consultative one. The issue is to establish whether tendencies to appropriate or confiscate power can be countered within the framework of participatory structures.

In my view the risk of political exploitation is particularly significant because we are dealing with citizens who are not organized collectively, as is the case in most districts with social housing. Elected representatives may be tempted to transfer the responsibility of their condition onto their citizens themselves, just as the deliberative resolution of issues in private companies may enable employers to evade responsibility by transferring the responsibility for their own behaviour onto their paid employees. The continuation of forms of counter-power that emerged during deliberation here is therefore essential for generating benefits equitably and durably. It is also important to question the effects of deliberative experiments set up merely to respond to some state injunction about highly 'fashionable' deliberation. Elected representatives could then use these experiments as a buffer against traditional political criticism and as a pretext for the legitimation of their own power and authority.

Yet it is often the case that, after the period of experimentation, the individuals taking part in empowerment workshops struggle to continue communicating and demonstrating critical and collective action. We know that in the absence of any connection with political arguments within the public arena, citizens' claims only have a very limited critical reach.<sup>24</sup> Can a 'link' be fostered without any delegation of

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<sup>24</sup> See the theory of the 'actantial system', which highlights the importance of identifying an enemy in the process of public denunciation (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1991).

power to representatives? Conversely, can we possibly imagine the continuation of a 'participatory' type of social movement? The classical hypothesis in political sociology is that social movements emerge in a participatory form and are then gradually organized according to the representational model (election of representatives, spokespeople, official programmes) in order to increase their efficiency. However, using a study of American feminist pacifist groups set up to defend civic rights, Francesca Polletta has shown that participatory movements can still be efficient without becoming pyramidal 'war machines' managed by a small group of representatives (Polletta, 2002). But this kind of process takes a great deal of time, and one cannot expect participation in six months' training sessions to transform a small group of inhabitants into a deliberative social movement. As Eliasoph has pointed in her critique of 'plug-in volunteering', empowerment needs to be ongoing rather than a brief, in-and-out affair (Eliasoph, 2011). If flexible forms of involvement are a means of reaching those who are not prepared for lasting and regular collective participation, their social or political consequences may be uncertain or even harmful.

As such, the small group of representatives in Clamoire made up of professionals and inhabitants only persisted for a period of several weeks in directing their critique at several levels of their town's functioning and social administration. Some of them, including Lila, met the association '*Un toit pour tous*', which defends the rights of those with poor housing, and were keen to pursue their commitment to the cause. Others chose to defend the cause of social housing applicants at the *Conseil d'agglomération* by asking elected representatives to ensure that wealthier councils increased their provision of social housing. Following proposals made by the group, a monthly meeting was set up to address the needs of social housing applicants in the town. Three members of the workshop went on to take part in these meetings to promote what they had learnt. Yet one who had participated in the empowerment workshop and who works both as a union delegate and a volunteer in a football club – Yacine – expressed a specific concern in relation to the monthly meetings:

There is one danger: are we here only to inform? I don't want to provide an alibi for public housing agencies and elected representatives who have no housing to offer. I want to provide information for other housing applicants, but not just to 'calm them down' by telling them to wait.  
(interview with Yacine)

Yacine thus raises the crucial issue of the political exploitation of citizen critique that might occur in a participatory process. How might the critique be extended over time, and how might it incite public housing agencies and elected representatives to grant housing equitably and initiate projects for the construction of new social housing? Our fourteen participants were unable to become a permanent pressure group. After just a few weeks following the departure of the consultant, the collective action ran out of steam. The hope of the funder of this project had focused entirely on the presence of the national housing confederation in the group at its monthly meetings. What was expected of this association for the defence of tenants' interests, which operates according to an 'agonistic' approach, was that it would now defend the interests of applicants for social housing. Some of those who had taken part in the empowerment workshop subsequently did become involved in initiatives with the national housing confederation. A bridge was thus built between the two forms of engagement. Furthermore, the salaried employee of the CNL, by taking part in the workshop and the organization of monthly meetings, integrated deliberative forms of action into the traditional association and contributed to the shift from an 'agonistic' type of structure towards a structure better adapted to specific local conditions.

The pitfall of the absence of a permanent form of deliberative counter-power is nonetheless illustrated here by Lila, who in the end was not involved in '*Un toit pour tous*' or in any other militant network. Along with a handful of other participants in

the group, she had vowed to defend the interests of social housing applicants in her home town. Six months after the group meetings came to an end, when I returned to see her, Lila had given up trying to denounce the injustices of social housing beyond her immediate circle of friends, family and colleagues. Her 'withdrawal' suggests the need for reflection on the forms of articulation between the unique yet ultimately fleeting experience of deliberation and the more stable forms of collective action embodied by a party, union or association. Her political capacities had been transformed during these six months, but this transformation was very limited and fragile.

Deliberative experiments are thus subject to a double pitfall, and the most highly politicized participants, such as Yacine, are aware of this. The effects of the resulting frustration and disappointment may diminish the effects of recognition and politicization that may have developed at an earlier stage.

#### **4. Concluding comments**

Ethnographic observation of deliberative procedures in working-class districts is intended to provide the basis for a detailed and critical examination of the processes of politicization in individuals who are normally removed from all forms of political engagement. It shows how they can contribute to the publicization of widely ignored social problems (Dewey, 1927).

The deliberative experience analyzed in this research makes us think about contemporary shifts in forms of public engagement. It shows that deliberative procedures can trigger an increase of power, a recognition of citizens' status and some degree of politicization, albeit fragile, in minorities remote from public expression. As Young's analysis also suggested, the democratic virtues of contentious political practices have to be taken into account. 'It is only by opening

deliberation to non-argumentative and critical forms of expression that it can achieve its ideal of inclusion and social change' (Young, 2001). In our unjust world, Fung states, where political institutions are not based on collective decision-making and resource inequalities are maintained at a high level, 'deliberative activism' is required in order to increase deliberative inclusion and equality (Fung, 2005).

In this empowerment workshop, politicization implied a concern to 'do politics differently' by rejecting strong vertical delegations and promoting more flexible and temporary forms of engagement focussing more specifically on problem-solving. This produced a hybrid mobilization that is neither a spontaneous and autonomous organization of citizens, nor a form of action implanted by the authorities, with all the issues that this implies in terms of the efficiency of political action.

Indeed, this article underlines difficulties in the durability of a collective action capable of weighing on the decisions made by representatives and administrators. In the absence of any structured involvement of participants in pressure groups or linkages with existing collectives, the 'artificial' nature of the initiation of collective action may cause its 'relapse'. Yet another determining factor – the political objective pursued by the sponsor of deliberative measures – was also highlighted here. When the request is motivated, implicitly or explicitly, by the goal of favouring the political emancipation of those 'without a voice', the defence of their rights and the democratisation of governance, the effects of the empowerment workshop are significant, as we have seen with Celine and the changes that occurred in her service. Yet the risk of 'relapse' of the public is high when individuals do not organize themselves through collective action. As Eliasoph shows, empowerment requires time, and only the intensity and repetition of the experiences concerned can influence participants in a way that can prove lasting (Eliasoph, 2011).

Finally, this article emphasises that empowerment is a social construct and in order to understand it better, researchers need to link up fields often considered to be disconnected: conflictual, bottom-up approaches to citizenship (social movements), institutional apparatuses (those of participatory democracy), and day-to-day practices (ordinary citizenship).

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