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Poor, immigrants and citizens ?
Empirical study of seven professional-militants's techniques to organize deliberation
in social housing neighbourhoods

Summary

In order to learn about the functioning of deliberative devices, we need to invent a political ethnography which is able to measure both internal effects – on the participants – and external effects – on the public sphere. Such an ethnographic investigation, held on participatory experiments in the poor public housing estates, gives knowledge about the effects of deliberation and allows a confrontation between practice and theory. It appears that deliberation in small groups, organised in the working class districts, far from producing consensus and recurring inequalities in the access to public voice, can generate preliminary politicisation and publicisation of social problems, so that it's possible to talk about "temporary collaborative countervailing power". Nevertheless, the experience reveals as fragile and raises the question of the continuity of collective action generated by deliberative processes.

Introduction

The paper analyses, through a pragmatist perspective, the spurs of the constitution of a democratic confrontation between the population and the institutions in social housing neighbourhoods. It is presenting part of the results of my Phd thesis (Carrel, 2004). The analysis of "intermediary public" experiments organised by consultants highlights the factors which make inhabitants' participation to the definition of policies possible. These experiments allow, under certain conditions, the conformation of social and administrative disorders into public problems (**publicisation**), and a beginning of **politicisation**. It allows an evitement of the "evaporation of politics" that usually occurs when individuals speak in front of representatives, journalists or civil servants (Eliasoph, 1998). These experiments also raise questions about the real power given to inhabitants, the professionalisation of participation, and the articulation with social movements.

The question of the effects of deliberative devices on people and decision remains as an unexplored field. Researches on deliberation have mainly developed in political philosophy, with a focus rather on the outputs of the deliberation than on the details of its process. In sociology and psychosociology, internal observations do exist, but they have barely not tried to measure the effects on the public sphere (political choices, public claims and arguments, visibility of social problems, representation of interests). The methodologic challenge is thus to find the way to observe both internal and external effects of deliberation on people and decisions, while trying to articulate theory and empirical findings. Political ethnography such as Nina Eliasoph's one, with a pragmatist perspective, appears as very useful (Eliasoph, 1998). It allows to analyse the formation of public problems and the variety of regimes existing in different interaction contexts, while taking into account the structural data. Thus,

the observers doesn't fall into the two traps : the "all empirical" trap with a description of empirical cases not easily connected to any generalisation, and the "all normative" trap with a quick reduction of empirical data on consideration about what is a "good democracy" or a "good deliberation" (Blondiaux, 2004).

We have adopted such a perspective about deliberation in an extreme fieldwork : the poor suburbans ditricts of France. Do the supposed positive effects of deliberation (better decisions, more informed and concerned citizens, politisation, etc.) appear with people that usually stay or are kept far from any political or public engagement ? What happens with people who cumulate stigmates (immigrates, unemployed, low-qualified, etc.) ? Are deliberation devides a way to create "countervailing power in empowered participatory governance" (Fung & Wright, 2003) ? If this is the case, what is their articulation with traditionnal social movements, political parties and all the long-term organisations based more on "conflict" than on "deliberation" ?

1. Professional-militants's techniques to organize deliberation in social housing neighbourhoods

The question of how inhabitants of poor neighbourhoods are involved is interesting because in these cases, people who usually don't take part into public debates (the silent ones), or speak without the proper manner (use violent words or acts) are the ones who are awaited to deliberate.

The observation of seven professional-militants work shows a certain number of techniques to make it possible that civil servants and inhabitants of poor districts deliberate. Users of public services (inhabitants of disadvantaged areas) and civil servants are involved in these experiments. The goal of the deliberation processes is to produce cooperation and to allow a time of reflexion for representatives, before eventually transforming the public service's organisation and policy.

The techniques deal with the idea of reversing the assymetry between people and representatives :

Deux ensembles de techniques ont été repérées.

1) **Le recours à des « artifices d'égalité »** apparaît tout d'abord propice au renversement, le temps de l'intervention, de l'asymétrie.

- *La proscription du langage technique et complexe sans explication* vise à atténuer les effets de domination par le langage et à rentrer dans une logique d'exploration de la complexité du monde social.
- *Le développement de relations de familiarité* entre des individus appartenant à des mondes habituellement opposés permet de rétablir un minimum de confiance personnelle et interpersonnelle. A cet égard, une *temporalité relativement longue* – une dizaine de journées de travail en moyenne – est considérée comme essentielle pour que la confrontation de récits individuels cède progressivement la place à l'élaboration d'une parole critique collective.
- *La rémunération des habitants* (sur nos terrains, uniquement dans la « qualification mutuelle » et la « Co-formation ») place les usagers et les agents sur un pied d'égalité. Une telle indemnisation existe dans certains dispositifs participatifs à l'étranger¹, mais

¹ Le « jury de citoyens » en Allemagne et le « sondage délibératif » dans divers pays.

reste extrêmement rare en France. Elle est défendue au motif qu'elle permet aux personnes qui n'ont ni les ressources ni le temps de se consacrer à la chose publique de pouvoir le faire, et qu'elle se justifie au même titre que les indemnisations des représentants syndicaux ou des jurés d'assises².

2) La **valorisation de récits individuels** autorise ensuite une mise en contact de l'administration avec la réalité des situations vécues. Les récits à la première personne du sujet, d'ordre privé, personnel ou communautaire, sont considérés comme essentiels en ce qu'ils constituent le point de départ du processus participatif. Le croisement de ces récits est vu comme le moyen de sortir des projections et de connecter les problèmes individuels à des questions politiques = logique de l'enquête comme support du public (Dewey, 1927). Ici, c'est une enquête co-produite par des habitants et des professionnels qui est encouragée.

These experiments – very rare in France - raise the question of the professionalization of participation. The seven experiments I have observed are organised by consultants who are also militants of the participatory democracy. It raises several questions : Isn't normally the role of social movements and civil servants, to organize deliberation ? Why do local authorities call for these professionals ? What tensions do exist between the role of consultant and the position of militant of participatory democracy ?

2. Politisation/empowerment and publicisation

The result of these experiments is not a sharing of the power of decision like in “participatory budgets” for instance, but it can have two major outcomes :

1) The **politisation/empowerment** of inhabitants.

The example of Lila, a young woman searching for a social housing, and her evolution towards politisation through her participation of a deliberative group about social housing
Cf. Carrel, 2006 : to be translated

2) The **publicisation** of social problems

The example of racism or violence against civil servants in charge of the social housing system, taken as starting points for an inquiry about social housing organisation, dysfunctionning and goals.
Cf. Carrel, 2006 : to be translated

With these cases, we can discuss the theory about “countervailing power in empowered participatory governance” (Fung & Wright, 2003).

3. Risks of evaporation and harnessing (exploitation) of the work for political ends

² La question de la rémunération fait l'objet de disputes. Elle est souvent jugée de prime abord choquante par les élus : « *Il faudrait payer les gens pour qu'ils soient citoyens, maintenant ?* », demandait l'un deux à S.

Rosenberg. Cette dernière avance généralement deux arguments à la rémunération. Le premier est de l'ordre de la reconnaissance : la rémunération agit comme un moyen de rétablir une certaine égalité entre habitants et professionnels. Le second est de l'ordre de la justice : les journées d'enquête sont un travail – les professionnels participant d'ailleurs sur leur temps de travail – et tout travail mérite salaire. Les débats autour de la rémunération des citoyens étaient déjà de mise à Athènes au 5^e siècle av. J.-C, avec l'instauration par Périclès du *misthos ecclesiasticos*, indemnité (de trois oboles) de présence à l'Assemblée pour les personnes tirées au sort comme juges. Si les analyses divergent sur les causes et les effets de cette mesure (FINLAY, 1984: 112), elle semble cependant bien avoir été prise en relation à l'appauvrissement de certains citoyens : les paysans éloignés de leurs terres pendant l'Assemblée recevaient ainsi une forme de dédommagement.

Two main risks of these experiments : being only a temporary event without any continuity of the critique (risk of evaporation) and being exploited for political ends (risk of harnessing)

Cf. Carrel, 2006 : to be translated

Elements of Bibliography

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