

## **Cultural Studies in the context of ecological emergency and social change**

### **1. Introduction and Methodological Approach**

This communication is part of a triple work currently being carried out within HELMo: a research project entitled “Cultural studies in the context of ecological emergency and social change”; participation in the development of a training course in social ecology and the development of learning activities within initial training in international cooperation and socio-sports activities. It is in the face of the magnitude of the widely documented ecological and socio-political challenges that the term emergency is used (Willemez, 2015). The actors studied are the so-called subordinate audiences organized into collectives (Maltcheff, 2011). Originally, the subaltern public was defined by Antonio Gramsci as composed of “marginal social groups or fundamental classes although still not hegemonic” (Liguori, 2016). It is in its more antagonistic dimension and its relationship with the notion of “dominant” that it is interesting to approach this concept of subordinate. It is the concrete proposals of these collectives that constitute the empirical material of this research. The citizen collectives investigated are not limited to the world of work but concern social problems (Starck, 2005), for example, the zones to be defended (ZAD) or even the Yellow Jackets. They have the particularity of highlighting a crisis of confidence between civil society (Pirotte, 2010) and the political world concerning major societal issues. In this context, Cultural Studies (Cervulle & Quemener, 2015) feed the methodological approach and the ethnographic approach chosen, in order to understand and make known the existing action initiatives for change regarding to the current model of society. By citizen collective is meant any organization of militant actors highlighting a crisis of confidence between civil society and the political world concerning major societal issues (Starck, 2005). From a methodological perspective, we realized this article based on thirty-nine semi-open interviews with migrants, environmental activists, Yellow Jackets, recipients of social assistance, squatters, zadists, zapatistas, doormen words of initiatives, self-managed centers, cooperative farms and authors who are part of citizen collectives. These are defined by Nancy Fraser as subaltern counter-publics: “Thus she defends the idea that the public space is not the single sphere, co-extensive with the political community, modeled by Jürgen Habermas, but that it also constitutes subaltern counter-publics” (Ferrarese, 2015). These are conceived as “parallel discursive arenas in which members of subordinate social groups construct and disseminate counter-discourses, allowing them to provide their own interpretation of their identities, interests, and needs” (Fraser, 2005). The observations and interviews reveal different orientations, proposals and recurring practices developed in point 2. Clearly explicit during the third international meeting on social ecology, the filiation with social ecology appears more subtly in the other contexts investigated. Thus, several actors interviewed confide to us that their commitment preceded their knowledge of social ecology. It is indeed interesting to note that the practices and orientations applied and conveyed by the fields investigated merge with the main concepts developed by Murray Bookchin, Floréal Roméro and Vincent Gerber. How to transfer the concepts of social ecology to the professional practice of a social worker?

## **2. First results: six logics of action identified and documented**

**2.1 An aspiration for immanent social change**, with a strong idea of direct and local democracy, in opposition to the idea of representative democracy as much as to the idea of participative democracy; *"That's a cream pie! Because everyone calls for participatory democracy (...) Participating means come, come and give your opinion, that already exists, neighborhood councils, in France we have that, we can go there as much as we want. It is always the elected officials who decide. Direct democracy is the citizens who decide directly. And that the politicians do not want. I see well even at the local level in Commercy, we have a charter to come on the list (...) So participatory democracy for me it amounts to the same as representative democracy today with more smoking."* (Excerpt from interview with Claude, Yellow Jacket from Commercy, on La commune des communes in Sampigny, 2020).

**2.2 Explicit anti-capitalist sentiment**. Not the slightest credit is yet given to an economic system based on growth and infinite resources;

*"The public space will always be the place where our opposition to their governance and the inequalities on which it is built will be expressed.*

*These streets are ours, day and night, we inhabit them. We are among those who demand social and ecological justice. We can take back our places, our theaters, our parks, our schools, our businesses. We don't need a security order or austerity measures that weigh on our lives. We want a social and economic organization in the image of our realities and our capacities to make common."* (Excerpt from "May 1 call" by the ephemeral collective "Même pas mal", 2021)

**2.3 A return to the local and to nature**, with a view to reclaiming local territories and their natural specificities;

*"Okay, I have to do something and so I wanted to grow vegetables to change the world. Permaculture, for me, is the solution"* (Interview excerpt from a player in a cooperative farm, 2021).

**2.4 A practical desire to be in the doing and if possible with one's own hands**, this in the continuity of the concern for the reappropriation of local territories, this time oriented towards the relationship between individuals and their environment. This concerns different dimensions such as the relationship to the land, to food, to housing – light housing – or even to the various services to the community; *"After 4 weeks of work, there are people who radically change their perspectives, without talking about it, it's just doing it. Making a yurt together is so emancipating"*. (Excerpt from interview with Lio, RIES 2019).

**2.5 A principle of popular assembly**, application of the principle of collective decision-making based on the participation and expression of all. These assemblies are preceded by long methodological debates, so that all participants can guarantee equality during the debates; *"The way the idea of democracy is approached at the ZAD, it is approached almost in a communalist way."* (Excerpt from interview with Roland D., Yellow Jacket and member of the ZAD d'Arlon, 2020); *"It is really important that it is the community that will appoint a person who has political office. Democracy works by direct election."* (Excerpt from an interview with a Zapatista delegation, 2021).

**2.6 A politically responsible and locally engaged citizenship**, whether civilly or in official elections, in which case, like the communal lists of Yellow Jackets in France. This idea is accompanied by the refusal of political negotiations. *"...it's really the idea of a confederation that will work both on local and daily struggles because in addition we are municipalists so*

we consider that **the struggle must be anchored in a territory** and also on national and global perspectives... Here you are..." (Interview extract from M. du PEPS, 2020)

### **3. Discussion around social ecology and observed democratic processes**

Social ecology is a notion that appeared a few decades ago in various authors (Bookchin, 1982; Romero, 2019; Gerber, 2019). For Bookchin, social ecology aims to decentralize power to get out of the logics of domination and return to local dynamics less marked by these logics. In this movement, there is therefore the desire to promote a society without social class with citizens responsible for the management of their municipality, using direct and local democracy. Social ecology thus advocates a return to basic needs by preventing the uncontrollable growth linked to capitalism. Citizens reclaim power but also control of technology to allow human beings to emerge from alienation.

#### **3.1. Adaptation of initial training for student educators specializing in socio-sports activities and international cooperation.**

In parallel with the elaboration of the conclusions of this research, we carried out an experiment within a Teaching Unit entitled: 'Creating a sustainable social project'. The results of this experiment take the form of an adaptation of the Project Methodology according to the principles of social ecology.

#### **3.2. Understanding of observed democratic processes**

##### **3.2.1. Participatory versus direct and local democracy**

The public investigated so far in the context of this research does not adhere to these participatory proposals which it considers insufficient as regards the questioning of capitalism.

##### **3.3. Public involvement in decision-making processes (*Transdisciplinarity*)**

The current health situation has projected in the foreground and in a monopolistic way in the media the word of the experts. This is the basis on which governments rely to take the measures that have affected our daily lives for two years now. The hermetic nature of this decision-making process may raise questions. Why are the populations directly impacted by these measures never associated with the decision-making processes? Could we not imagine a form of *popular epidemiology*, that is a dynamic in which representatives of civil society, of the associative and union sectors, of ordinary citizens, of representatives of the various professional sectors would be associated with the experts and political representatives in a new form of governance? In the same way, why the many actors in the field that we met, squatters, environmental activists, Yellow Jackets, zadists, who are already reflecting on the issues of transition, sustainability, social change and implementing them in concrete actions, are they not involved in more institutionalized governance processes? A potential answer is perhaps in some form of **transdisciplinary** approach. In the definition of **transdisciplinarity** to which the authors return in the article "Towards a reflective Transdisciplinarity, integrating reflexivity on values and capacities for co-construction in partnership research" (Dedeurwaerdere, T., Popa, F., Guillermin, M. and Herrero, P., 2019: 305-316). "*In other words, transdisciplinarity refers to an iterative, reflective and critical research process that integrates scientists and relevant actors or groups of actors around interdisciplinary knowledge systems on a wide variety of topics*" (Dedeurwaerdere, Popa, Guillermin, Herrero, 2015). Is it not therefore possible to integrate this notion of transdisciplinarity into future systems and modes of governance in social work?

### 3.4. Legitimate actions?

The question of the legitimization of the actions and initiatives raised by the actors is unfounded because they feel legitimate in their actions and rather expect support from society.

### Conclusion

The identification of the proposals and practices of the citizen groups met is specified in this article, it makes it possible to better understand the common base of the initiatives of these organized groups. What emerges is a political orientation towards a deep desire for social change, a politically responsible and locally engaged citizenship.

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