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Thinking Youth Popular University as a Participative Space: Focus on a Speakers' Corner Experience, between Participatory Culture, Citizen Commitment and Political Empowerment

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This paper draws on the first results of an ongoing research (2017-2021), on the implementation of a Youth Popular University (YPU) in a French metropolitan area (Northern France) (Azizi & Maury, 2018). Our objective is to study the actions developed under this project, and specifically, during the first phase, how young people (18-30 years old) are mobilizing, in particular when involving in speakers' corner experiences.

Few studies exist on YPUs, but are numerous on popular education. Many of them highlight a youth participation “through action”, and a commitment “by doing”; they refer to a political vision tending to “the promotion of activation and empowerment of users”, at the opposite of a consumerist approach (Allemand *et al.*, 2017; Loncle, 2008). In this perspective, “speakers' corners” (SC) are seen as opportunities, in non formal environments, to live rich and complex experiences. Recent studies insist on their role as “meeting places”, where actors can interact, practicing free expression, debating, verbalizing their experiences...; and as “potential spaces”, promoting problematization of knowledge from experiences (Gehl, 2004), along with the development of social, relational and informational skills. Seen through the lens of knowledge and learning-training, it is part of “participatory culture” (Fortin *et al.*, 2014; Jenkins, 2016), and closely related to the ability of “critical consciousness”, essential to the building of a coherent and reasoned vision of reality (Elmborg, 2006). However, studies point out that participation is not equally educative, and it does not necessarily create opportunities for deeper learning and broader thinking, able to activate connections.

What can we say about the speakers' corner experience and its role in citizen commitment and political empowerment? What do the actors' practices reveal about its potential? To what extent does it contribute – or not - to the development of participatory and critical (information) culture(s)?

In terms of methodology, we use a qualitative and comprehensive approach, collecting field data in immersion, close to the actors (young people, facilitators), to better understand their experiences: ethnographic observations with “thick descriptions”, informal conversations, semi-structured interviews, photographs, collection of documents...

The results are based on the data collected throughout the SC implementation process: from the reflection on a previous SC experience (strengths, limitations), to the mobilization of young people during a training phase, until the key moment of its effective implementation. In an anthropological perspective, we consider the SC as an evolutive process, as it is experienced by the actors (Turner & Bruner, 1986), paying attention, beyond their narratives, to their “ways of being” in the world, between individual and collective, sensible and intelligible.

As designed in the project, as potential space, the “speakers' corners” (SC) offer opportunities to live complex experiences. “Young people have critical faculties, critical sense, naturally developed, but not always well controlled, when expressed through violence or anger. How to channel criticism, with method, to make it constructive, sending a clear message?” asks the project manager.

From enclosed space to public space (plaza in front of a station), the speakers' corners” are a platform for free speech, for expression of critical consciousness on transverse issues (City as a playground; Youth and environment “Free your voice”) : more theatrical on esplanade (outdoors), they attract passersby, arousing curiosity ; placemaking reinforces connections between people and spaces they share: reflection on how take ownership of the city, thinking everyday spaces and their potential (making common spaces, the heart of community).

From the microphone to the megaphone, the voice amplification brings a performative dimension. The power of words and images is reinforced by the amplification of sound (increased presence, in other physical spaces; happening/appropriation of public space). The live interventions on the plaza find an extension via the Facebook of the People's Youth University (YPU): this virtual presence is at the origin of interactions (likes, comments, questions), it contributes to make SC and YPU known.

Towards a speakers' corner literacy? Young people develop communication and expression skills, both oral and written (only a small digital part) : how to communicate and promote ideas (points of view, experiences, information), preparing for participation. The project manager insists on three key words: thinking a message; attracting and engaging the audience; conversing, reinforcing dialogue.

In terms of limitations and challenges, these experiences allow for commitment through action, “by doing”, but these are two events that “happen” without deployment over time: there are difficulties in attracting and recruiting young people: events in different cities and places, with local recruitment; difficulties in broadening recruitment: young people are already informed and/or engaged in actions, in existing networks; difficulties in retaining them: those who intervene tend not to return, and to be part of YPU on a regular basis (consumption, post-it commitment). At this stage of the project, we can speak of commitment (vs. embodied participation): attention is focused on some objects (vs. civic agency), related to practical, do-able activities (Dahlgren, 2009). Moving from a minimalist to a maximalist approach is a challenge for the future.

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