

Democratic environments

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How do environmental concerns affect forms of democratic participation? Comparing a deliberative process in Poitou to citizens' mobilization in Ardèche, an ethnographic study examines how citizens engage in politics and conflict.

About: Laura Seguin, *Apprentissages de la citoyenneté. Expériences démocratiques et environnement* (Learning Citizenship: Democratic Experiences and the Environment), Paris, Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme, 2020, 358 p., 24 €.

While a range of institutional, academic, and activist actors maintain that citizens should be given powers that go beyond the right to vote, the specific forms of this democratic transformation remain hazy. On the one hand, citizens can be seen as examples of counterpower, contesting and protesting political actions and leaders through various forms of engagement, from the most technical (such as providing second opinions) to the most agonistic (as with demonstrations and civil disobedience). On the other, the rise of the "deliberative imperative" (Blondiaux and Sintomer, 2002) partakes in a conception of citizens as capable of coproducing public policy, through mechanisms by which randomly selected participants, trained in often complex topics, deliberate on specific proposals and recommendations. The Citizens Convention for Climate, inaugurated in October 2019, familiarized the French with deliberating mini-publics as credible tools for responding to multiple democratic crises.

Two concepts would thus seem at odds with one another: *protest* citizenship and *deliberative* citizenship. This opposition resonates with contemporary debates concerning the very nature of democracy, conceived alternately as an arena of unsurpassable conflict (Mouffe 2014) or as a deliberative space oriented at eliciting the best decisions (Habermas 1981). The appropriateness of this distinction is Laura Seguin's research question in *Apprentissage de la citoyenneté: Expériences démocratiques et environnement* (Learning Citizenship: Democratic Experiences and the Environment). Drawn from her dissertation, the book proposes a comparative analysis of the anti-fracking movement in the Ardèche region and a randomly selected citizens water management panel in Poitou-Charentes. Seguin uses the concept of *apprentissage*--learning or apprenticeship--to unravel the distinction between deliberation and conflict and to shift the debate to a consideration of the forms and effects of various kinds of participation.

To complete this project, Seguin prioritizes ethnographic investigation, which "alone is capable of gathering experiences--that is, not only what actors *do*, but also what the latter *does to them*" (p. 15). Following an introduction that presents the stakes of a combined analysis of protest and deliberation, Seguin, in part one, describes the two realms before focusing, in part two, on the learning process, the effects and modalities of which are analyzed in the book's last part. At a more implicit level, the book explores the contours of a pluralistic politics of non-violence that is not, however, premised on the absence of conflict.

Dispelling the myth of the neutral citizen

Seguin proposes a pragmatic analysis of participatory democracy that provides a precise description of participation as it occurs and what actors learn from it. This approach makes it possible, in the first place, to dispense with a conception of the "citizen" that is rooted in neutrality--a civic identity that transcends partisan affiliations and traditional political cleavages. Whereas the idea of civic participation generally implies a dynamic within civil society that does not take sides and that lacks a distinct political orientation, Seguin's book allows for an analysis of the persistent tension between neutrality and the particular commitments of actors.

Thus Seguin considers the role of all participants in the Poitou-Charentes citizens panel, demonstrating how the constitution of such panels invariably entails

conflict and arbitration. In the context of a debate over water management, the organization of a random selection process involved a struggle between two organizations: the Basin Territorial Public Facility (Établissement public territorial du bassin, or EPTB) and the Institute for Training and Research in Environmental Education (Institut de formation et de recherche en éducation à l'environnement, or Ifrée). The EPTB had little experience with citizens' participation when it was not limited to directly affected populations. Founded in 1977, this union's goal is to coordinate water management initiatives in the Charente River drainage basin. The Ifrée, for its part, specializes in adult education and assisting environmental actors. Many of its employees are professionals with activist backgrounds, as exemplified by their highly involved president. While the EPTB emphasizes the issue of *representativity*, the Ifrée focuses on *debate quality*: consequently, the contours of the deliberation were constructed through a series of negotiations, which were a function of the power relationships between the organizers, and through the art of compromise, which was a far cry from the ideal of politically neutral deliberation.

In this context, however, the ideal of citizens' neutrality led the organizers to exclude all activists from the panel. Yet this ideal of a *representative* panel, with no interest of its own, encountered a reality comprised of citizens invested and situated in distinct social and political circumstances. For Seguin, citizens "are differentiated by their prior knowledge of water-related conflicts, their political socialization, as well as the motives leading them to take part in these efforts" (p. 43). In Poitou-Charentes, a conflict existed between defenders of traditional agriculture based on irrigation and the promoters of farming practices respectful of the environment. Far from behaving like neutral and immaculate individuals, with no views on local water management issues, the participants had commitments and launched into a discussion of their past experiences. For instance, a retired farmer named Georges, who had once belonged to the FNSEA,¹ the farmers' union, remained invested in the property he passed onto his son and was highly involved in conflicts over water management.

¹ Translator's note: The FNSEA stands for Fédération nationale des syndicats d'exploitants agricoles, or National Federation of Agricultural Holders' Unions.

An anti-fracking movement: Between radicalism and institutionalization

The protest movement against the extraction of shale gas, for its part, began after alerts initiated by a Greenpeace activist, who was also a local spokesperson for Europe-Écologie Les Verts (a Green party), relating to research permits granted in Ardèche. Seguin describes the many people involved and the significant inequalities in political culture between new and experienced activists. The majority felt far removed distant from political institutions, and even from the very concept of "activism"--which restricted their ability to think freely--preferring that of "engagement."

When the movement's base expanded, following several public meetings, different forms of activism emerged: pragmatic activism, centered on action and communication; an activism focused on providing second opinions that established dossiers to plead its case; a primarily political form of activism, anchored in prior political engagements; and a "politicophobic" activism, which often presented itself as breaking completely with the political world. If the movement ultimately opted for collective mobilization over the counter-expertise strategy, which testified to the prevalence of activists with more political trajectories, it gradually institutionalized itself through *Collectif 07*, which aspired to be horizontal and democratic. Institutionalization--and the professionalization of the movement it implied, arose from two main goals: the demand to be taken seriously and the desire to start a dialogue with public officials.

This movement was thus led to value different competencies, its representatives being *tribunes*, capable of addressing activists, as well as *debaters*, knowing how to address institutional actors. Yet the movement's progressive institutionalization had several consequences: a way of operating that was more and more vertical and less and less participatory; the transcendence of the "not in my backyard" attitude² in favor of a genuinely political conception of energy issues; and a disposition to cooperate with public actors, which made possible learning argumentative and deliberative competencies.

² "Not in my backyard" or Nimby refers to the position that residents adopt to a project whose local consequences appear harmful for them, independent of the project's value for the general interest or its overall harmfulness for the environment.

Analogical learning

Beyond the meticulous description of participation-in-action, the book's main theoretical contribution lies in the connection it traces between conflict and deliberation, based on an analysis of what actors learn and the modalities of this learning process.

The citizens' panel, despite the steering committee's tendency to avoid political conflict, decided, at the Ifr e's initiative, to defend "education through conflict" as it relates to water. During the first weekend of discussion, the focus was on acquiring competencies about conflicts, notably through an effort to present the various parties involved in water management issues. The appeal of conflict was not spontaneous. Seguin shows that citizens were inclined to avoid politics. Leadership and learning methods drawing on role-playing exercises made it possible, however, to overcome these dispositions.

Similarly, in the anti-fracking movement in Ard che, learning how to deliberate went hand-in-hand with learning about conflict: actors arrived at internal decisions through consensus, familiarizing themselves with the language of public actors, and participating in various activities, such as role-playing games, "moving debates" (in which participants move to different sides of a room based on their position on a question, with the right to change sides as each position makes its case), and forum theater.

Seguin's book makes it possible to visualize and conceptualize an "agonistic practice and model of deliberative democracy" (Blondiicaux 2008, p.135). By concentrating on the concept of the learning process and its various modalities, she considers the formal analogies between institutionalized participation (among mini publics) and social movements. Her book provides a new perspective on the overlap between institutionalized "domesticated debates" and "savage debates," which transcend institutional frameworks (Mermet 2007). It also sheds light, implicitly, on the experience of the Citizens Convention for Climate, which was notable for the significant involvement of activists, who became major supporters of the initiative. During the Citizens Convention, media coverage and long interludes between sessions allowed for genuine exchange between actors engaged in the fight against climate change and deliberating citizens. Seguin's analysis makes it possible to understand how many climate activists, on this occasion, transformed themselves into "deliberative activists" (Fung 2011), and why so many randomly selected citizens

became, by participating in climate demonstrations and joining the fight against a government and climate legislation that were deemed disappointing, *protesting deliberators*.

Towards a politics of non-violence?

Two further aspects of Seguin's work deserve mention. The first concerns the opposition between technique and politics, which is found throughout the book. It initially appears in her study of the organization the citizens panel, with the EPTB prioritizing technical goals and the Ifr e founded on engagement and the mobilization of actors who are, for the most part, activists. It also manifests itself in her analysis of the anti-fracking movement, in the tension between forms of action that are political (such as demonstrations) and those that are technical (as with second opinions). Finally, it appears--even more clearly--in her examination of the reception of the citizens' panel's conclusions by institutional actors. Seguin observes that "some passages of their opinion seemed non 'hearable' because they did not correspond to a conception of politics as expert-based, technical, sectorized, and depoliticized 'management' (p. 196). For instance, the EPTB's president immediately dismissed proposals that were deemed too "hard." Learning the discourse of scientific and technical expertise thus seemed the only way to render citizens' voices audible.

While this opposition undoubtedly has heuristic value, it merits further exploration. In this context, the opposition between technique and politics, presupposes that there exists a framework for public policy, which can be modified by some political choices and left unchanged by others. The opposition between managerial orientation (i.e., technique) and political orientation could, rather, be interpreted as a clash between two regimes of feasibility. Given technical discourse's strong emphasis on the (socially and economically) acceptable character of policy recommendations, it would be interesting to explore the way in which discourse deemed "political" thematizes the question of possibility. Hence education through conflict does not necessarily occur by shifting from a technical to a political register, but by developing the technical perspective in a way that broadens the question of possibility, without restricting, as a matter of principle, the range of possibilities by unquestioned ideas about social acceptability or economic cost.

Secondly, Seguin's book puts forward a definition of violence as the antithesis of participation, understood as deliberative and conflictual activity. As a refusal of dialogue, violence represents the negation of inclusive participation in which knowledge is acquired. In her conclusion, Seguin invokes an "imperative of non-violence": "In the two cases studied, it was not conflict that was excluded from the arenas of discussion--the latter are, rather objects of construction and learning--but modalities of violent expression that amount to a rupture in dialogue" (p. 315). Yet this disqualification of violence, understood, in the book, as all forms of expression that lead to a rupture in dialogue, merits further examination. For if violence constitutes the "other" of participation, it can nonetheless have a democratic function--precisely that of determining the boundaries of the acceptable. The distinction between participants who accept non-violence and those who presume that political space will be agonistic requires, however, debate among all relevant actors. That said, nothing suggests that moments of rupture in dialogue are inherent and necessary, whether to social movements or participatory processes. While there is no denying that these moments are rejected by organizers in deliberative and contestatory spaces, this should not hinder us from considering their democratic potential.

Further reading:

- Loïc Blondiaux, "Démocratie délibérative vs. Démocratie agonistique? Le statut du conflit dans les théories et les pratiques de participation contemporaines." *Raisons politiques*, vol. 30, n°2, 2008, p. 131-47.
- Loïc Blondiaux, Yves Sintomer, "L'impératif délibératif," *Politix*, vol. 57, n°1, 2002, 17-35.
- Archon Fung, "Délibérer avant la révolution. Vers une éthique de la démocratie délibérative dans un monde injuste." *Participations*, vol. 1, n°1, 2011, 311-34.
- Jurgen Habermas, *Théorie de l'agir communicationnel*, Paris, Fayard, 1987 [1981].
- Laurent Mermet "Épilogue. Débattre sans savoir pourquoi: la polychrésie du débat public appelle le pluralisme théorique de la part des chercheurs", in M. Revel, C. Blatrix, L. Blondiaux, J.-M. Fourniau, B. Hériard Dubreuil, R. Lefebvre, ed., *Le débat public: une expérience française de démocratie participative*, Paris, la Découverte, 2007, p. 368-380.
- Chantal Mouffe, *Agonismes: penser politiquement le monde*, Paris, les éditions Beaux-Arts de Paris, 2014.

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