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## **For a public sociology on participatory democracy Reflexive feedback on a research conducted in an association**

Héloïse Nez (author's version)

For a decade, research on participatory practices has proliferated, whereas these processes aiming at associating "ordinary" citizens (i.e. neither elected officials nor practitioners) in local public policy making were spreading in Spain, in Europe and on other continents (Font 2001; Santos 2002; Fung and Wright 2003; Avritzer and Navarro 2003; Bacqué, Rey and Sintomer 2005; Blondiaux 2008; Smith 2009; Bacqué et al. 2010). Whereas there are many gateways between the academic, the political and the activist fields on participatory democracy, few works have developed a reflexive approach on the relationships between research and action. However, the research conducted in collaboration with local actors is developing, as testified, in France, by the profusion of the PhD conducted in the context of an Industrial training convention for research (French acronym Cifre). The Cifre convention is a work contract subsidised by the National association for research and technology (ANRT), which enables to realise a PhD while being a wage-earner in an association, a company or a public institution. If diversified financing schemes contribute to the development of research on participatory democracy and its dissemination in non-academic circles, this particular context of research production and its impact on results are still not analysed. The aim of this article is an in-depth study of this methodological aspect, by interrogating the diverse postures of the researchers interested in participatory democracy. The idea is to highlight the relationships between research, expertise and activism on participatory democracy, by analysing the impact of the close links between sociologists and field actors on the research methods and the results and, vice versa, the role of sociology<sup>1</sup> in the development of participatory practices.

This epistemological and methodological analysis is in line with an article by Michael Burawoy entitled "For public sociology" (2005), who fuelled many debates across the Atlantic on the social role of sociology<sup>2</sup>. Before him, Charles Wright Mills (1959) had already dedicated his essay on "sociological imagination" to the diffusion of knowledge to a non-university public. In this plea in favour of a sociology whose scope would go beyond academic circles, Burawoy invites sociologists to reach out to other public than their peers and to commit themselves actively with their socialising groups. He develops a typology distinguishing four sociology subtypes: professional sociology, which produces knowledge to his peers, so as to accumulate scores of knowledge; policy sociology, guided by a customer's demand; public sociology, intended for an extra-university public; and critical sociology, defined as the reflexive analysis of the tools and of the research programmes of the discipline. If the boundaries between these different types of sociology are porous, Burawoy defends a public sociology perspective, with the aim to initiate and to develop a dialogic relationship between the sociologist and the public, in which each comes forward with his goals and adjusts to the other. More than a simple incentive to reach out to new public, the American researcher chiefly invites sociologists to partake in the creation of public and to organize themselves into public. He thus encourages them to commit themselves with people and groups taking part in public life and engaged in political debates. The word "public" has here a twofold meaning, such as defined by John Dewey (1927), that is to say as a space of discussion where different actors may meet and dialogue, and as a group of people seeking to influence a politics. To a greater extent, Burawoy prompts researchers to ponder over the diffusion of the knowledge which they produce: "Knowledge for whom and knowledge for what?" (Burawoy 2005: 12). He thus repeats questions raised by two of his predecessors in the presidency of the *American Sociological Association* (ASA): "sociology for whom?" (Lynd 1939), which is intended solely

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<sup>1</sup> We use the term sociology generically, knowing that other disciplines are concerned by research on participatory democracy (political science, urban studies, history, etc.).

<sup>2</sup> See especially the collective book coordinated by Dan Clawson (2007).

for an university public or other public, and "sociology for what?" (Lee 1976), centred on the objectives of society or also interested in the means necessary for their fulfilment.

Burawoy defines here the posture and the interest of a public sociology in a general way in the sociological discipline, no matter the objects of study. The objective of our paper is to develop this reflection on public sociology from a particular object of study, the processes of local participatory democracy. The literature on participatory democracy, participation and deliberation is plentiful and diverse. We focus here on the empirical researches about participatory practices (participatory budgets, neighbourhood councils, devices of participatory town planning, citizen juries, deliberative pollings) on a local and regional scale. It is about institutional forms of participation, even if associations and citizens can play a significant role in the emergence of these processes led by the governments. The deliberative dimension of these devices can be important, in the case of citizen juries and deliberative pollings, or lesser as regards most of the other processes. We chose to focus on this object of study, rather than to approach all the works on participation and deliberation, because the researchers analyzing local participatory practices often maintain a more direct relation with the action and pay a particular attention on the impact of their studies on the transformation of participatory policies. On this aspect, researches on participatory democracy get closer of the militant fields (for example, researches on an association or a social movement), as far as they raise the suspicions on the posture of the researcher at the same time in the academic middle (which often blames him for a lack of distance with its object) and with regard to the investigated (who can, on the contrary, blame him for a lack of commitment in the action) (Broqua 2009). This question arises all the more when the researcher has affinities with the mobilizations or the participatory policies he observes. How to reconcile this double hat of researcher and activist, or at least of citizen committed or concerned by the participatory processes he observes? How to answer the classic dilemma of any field work, that of the just measure between distance and commitment? And how reconcile these two positions, rather than to set them, to advance at the same time the scientific research and to contribute to the action on participatory democracy?

To try to bring answers to these questions, our reflection is based upon a participant observation conducted, from 2006 to 2009, as a part of an Institution-citizen partnership for research and innovation (French acronym Picri) on local participatory practices in the Parisian region and in Europe. The specificity of these Picri programmes, sponsored by the Parisian Region in the context of a citizen's conception of science, comes from the collaboration of a team of researchers and field actors (in our case, an association) in the production of a research and the diffusion of its results. For three years, I have coordinated this research programme, as a research officer in the Association for local and social democracy and education (French acronym Adels), within the framework of a Cifre convention. The Adels brings together elected officials, practitioners of local authorities and of associations, researchers, activists and citizens who are committed locally, with a view to exchange and to present propositions for the development of participatory democracy at local scale. This historical actor in promoting the idea of decentralisation and of local participation in France, created in 1959 in the popular education trend (Hatzfeld 2005, Roux 2011), defends fifty years later a conception of participatory democracy which provides the connection between the principles of political equality, of social justice and of self-organisation (Adels 2010). Its activities fall in line with several areas, from training sessions for local actors to studies action, through the organisation of conferences (Meetings on local democracy), as well as the publishing of a monthly journal (*Territories*) and of books on participation.

Building upon this particular experiment, I shall first of all expose how the research has been conducted in this associative context. What are the specificities of this sociological posture and the differences relative to other ways to carry out research? What contributions and limits can be located from the standpoint of research and of collaboration between actors and researchers? This personal experience may contribute to the reflection around the public sociology on participatory democracy, because the objective of our programme was exactly to lead a collaborative research between university and associative actors on local participatory practices, and to develop reflexivity on our approach. To analyze the diversity of the postures of public sociology on participatory democracy and to question more widely the social role of these researches, this experiment will then be cross-referenced with other ways to produce

research in Europe, from observations conducted on programmes led in four research centres in Spain, in Italy, in Portugal and in Germany. By extrapolating our observations through the comparative method (Werner and Zimmermann 2004), I shall differentiate five typical postures of sociologists on participatory democracy, before concluding on the stake of developing a sociology which is both committed and critical, to contribute to the action while maintaining the ability to react with critical distance.

### **A research conducted within an associative framework**

Directly inspired by the University-community research alliances (Aruc) in Quebec, the Institution-citizen partnerships for research and innovation (Picri) correspond to a financial device set up by the Parisian region in 2006, so as to enable a joint research between associations and public research organisations. It was promoted by the Citizen science foundation, an association created in France in 2002 with a view to democratise science through greater citizens' involvement in the production of scientific research. This conception of the research is part of a more general trend which redefines the relationships between experts and laymen in the scientific and technical issues. This movement, which opens a new way of research for the historical and sociological studies of sciences (Collins and Evans 2002), was impelled in France by the publication of the book of Michel Callon, Pierre Lascoumes and Yannick Barthe (2001) on "technical democracy". By qualifying in these words the process of democratization of sciences and techniques, the authors show that the reintroduction of citizens in the political and technical decision-making redefines the relation between knowledge and power, and blur the traditional borders between expert and "layman" knowledge. So the idea was to consider the role of the not professionals in the production of the scientific knowledge and to reallocate the "power to know" (Bonneuil and Gaudillière 2000), so that counter-powers may have independent means of expertise available.

The Picri programme in which I was involved from 2006 to 2009 was conducted in collaboration with the Adels and two research laboratories of the CNRS (National centre for scientific research)<sup>3</sup>. The research concerned local participatory democracy in the Parisian region and in Europe, through the comparison of experiments conducted at different government scales in the Parisian region and the comparison with innovating experiments in other European contexts, in Rome and in Berlin mostly. The purpose was to analyse the nature of the participatory practices, the dynamics created, the achievements and the limits of such approaches. The research was centred more specifically on the construction, the nature and the taking into consideration of the citizen's knowledge in participatory processes, by interrogating the notion of citizen's expertise, and on the genealogy of the practices by analysing the transfers of knowledge and experiences from one site to the other. It seemed to us particularly interesting, in the field of local democracy where bridges are already numerous between the university, associative and political spheres, to generate joint knowledge between researchers and association officials. The aim of our programme was thus the production of scientific knowledge on participatory democracy, the training of local actors by integrating the findings of research and the diffusion of knowledge thereby inducing actors to reflect upon their own practices.

The twenty researchers involved in this programme could exchange with the participation practitioners in two distinct contexts. In the first instance, the Adels organized two training cycles in 2007 and 2008 on citizen's knowledge in participatory processes, intended for local actors in the Parisian region. Fourteen persons so participated in the first cycle: two elected representatives, three territorial agents, three associative professionals, four neighbourhood councillors and two associative activists from seven territories in the Parisian region (several Parisian districts, a suburb, a department, an intermunicipal association). In the second cycle, centred on the issues of participatory town planning, they were twenty three: two elected representatives, six territorial agents, two professionals, an associative

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<sup>3</sup> It was the Habitat research centre (CRH) and the Cultures and urban societies laboratory (CSU), the research having been coordinated by Marie-Hélène Bacqué and Yves Sintomer. For more information about this research and training programme, see the site of the Adels, accessed on 24 October 2011: [http://www.adels.org/formations\\_etudes/Picri.htm](http://www.adels.org/formations_etudes/Picri.htm).

professional, three associative activists, five neighbourhood councillors and four academics, from eight territories in the Parisian region. These various actors had for the greater part no links between them (set apart those coming from the same territory), as one of the goals of the training sessions was to create actors' network on participatory democracy in the Parisian region. With the training officer of the association, I organized four one-day sessions in Paris, on the nature of citizen's knowledge, the collection and the exploitation of knowledge, the exchange of knowledge and the inscription of the citizen's knowledge in the public decision-making process. At the end of each cycle, we organized a study stay in Rome then Berlin, so as to widen the debates beyond the French context. Interventions in these training sessions were provided by actors who had initiated innovative participatory practices and by researchers analysing innovative processes as well. We asked to the participants to prepare their intervention according to a series of questions, answering the concerns of the participants (expressed in the beginning of each training cycle) and in the objectives of every session. The researchers could thus present their work at different stages of evolution of research, from the first wording of assumptions up to the presentation of more advanced results. The study stays, arranged in collaboration with the University La Sapienza in Rome and the Centre Marc Bloch in Berlin, enabled the actors in the Parisian region to confront their experiences to the practitioners' in other European contexts and to exchange with researchers analysing these devices.

In a second step, we organized a dialogue between actors and researchers when the results of the Picri programme were presented, in the context of two international conferences in Paris, on the genealogy of participatory democracy in 2008 and on citizen's knowledge in urban issue in 2009. Even if the interventions were for their vast majority carried out by the researchers, half the participants were local actors (especially professionals of local authorities and of associations, but also some elected representatives and citizens implicated in participatory processes in the Parisian region), who thus could gain knowledge of the results of our research and discuss them. A debate was also staged during the Meetings of local democracy organized by the Adels in 2010, where find themselves elected representatives, technicians, associative and neighbourhood councils' members from different French cities. The aim was presenting the first book from the Picri programme (Bacqué et al., 2010) and to take stock of this experiment, between researchers and members of the association.

Contrary to a conception of the researcher in his ivory tower, this way of doing research is characterised by a permanent link with the field actors when conducting the investigation and by putting into public debate the results. I followed the same research approach for my PhD, prepared in Cifre convention in the Adels, which concerned the citizen's knowledge in town planning in Paris and Cordoba (Nez 2010). The purpose was to define the epistemological contribution of ordinary citizens to the local public action and to discuss the elitist conceptions of democracy, according to which citizens are supposedly incompetent as soon as said conceptions extend beyond the sphere of their immediate interests. My method for analysing participatory practices consisted in participant observation. The aim was an investigation of ethnographic type, characterised by a prolonged presence on the field and an insertion in an interknowledge environment (Burawoy 1998; Beaud and Weber 2003; Cefaï 2003). In addition, I maintained a dialogue throughout the research manufacturing process with the wage-earners and activists of the Adels. More formal debates on the results of my PhD were also organized, in collaboration with the practitioners and administrators of the Adels, at several stages of research. I thus presented the first results of my PhD, upon completion of a three-year field investigation, at the Summer University of the Adels in 2009. The fact that these exchanges occurred before I started to write enabled me to integrate the actors' remarks and questionings upstream of the writing process. I also stepped into the debate at the Meetings of local democracy, organized by the Adels in 2010 in Grenoble, by introducing more advanced results at a workshop.

#### *The contributions of a public sociology on participatory democracy*

This research conducted within an associative framework, in line with a "public sociology" posture as defined by Burawoy, includes at least three types of contribution. Through regular exchanges with the field actors, I could first of all enrich the sociological analysis. On the thematic of citizen's knowledge in participatory democracy, which was central

in the Picri programme as well as in my PhD, the actors were prompted to develop a reflexivity on their practices, which fed our sociological analyses. For example, when the typology of citizen's knowledge in participatory democracy elaborated by Yves Sintomer (2008) – which distinguishes an ordinary reason, a citizen expertise and a political knowledge – was put up for debate during a Picri training session, the discussions with the field actors revealed new analysis categories. An administrator of the Adels, a former elected official in local democracy in a Paris district and involved in numerous associations (especially in Tam-Tam, an association specialised in town planning and party to the concertation on the “ZAC Paris Rive Gauche”<sup>4</sup>), insisted on the prominence of the “networks competence” of associations to form counter-assessments in view of the projects of public authorities. Sharing the networks maintained by every member of an association in different spheres of local political life (town services, local elected officials, associations and participation authorities, press, universities, etc.) is indeed a skill in its own right which fuels the construction of an associative expertise. The typology of citizen's knowledge could hence be specified and developed in the field of participatory town planning through dialogue with field actors (Nez 2011).

These exchanges within the Picri training sessions provide as such a unique observation field, for those paying attention to the relations between the qualifications made by the researcher and the qualifications selected by the actors, on analysis categories which are also action principles (Boltanski and Thévenot 1991). The way actors understand the researchers' categories to feed and to justify their discourse (by interrogating the impact of research on the action and hence its social effectivity) can thus be analysed, as well as how exchange with actors influences, in return, the researchers' reflection. For example, when I presented my typology of citizen's knowledge in participatory town planning (which differentiates between local, professional and activist knowledge, as well as individual and collective knowledge), at the Summer University of the Adels in 2009, a Tam-Tam activist showed his interest when describing how the action of his association evolved: “The very existence of local knowledge, then of citizen's expertise, and finally a political expertise follows the evolution I experienced with the different phases of the ZAC Paris Rive Gauche”. Association officials have thus borrowed this typology to substantiate their discourses, the latter enabling to specify the contribution of ordinary citizens to participatory practices and to legitimise their participation, even if certain categories (such as describing as “expertise” the associative knowledge whereas the association demands, in the face of town departments' expertise, its knowledge to be departitioned) seem less useful than others to serve their purpose.

Finally, this position which could be depicted as “halfway” (since it both involves permanent links with the field actors and the researcher's autonomy when producing research) interestingly goes beyond an overhanging dimension of research, typical of Pierre Bourdieu's epistemological position, where the sociologist thinks he is imbued with a mission to unveil reality to the actors who are supposedly plunged in the world of illusion. It enables to “take actors seriously” (Boltanski and Thévenot 1991) and to enrich the analysis of their reflections, while conducting a scientific distancing work. This method therefore interestingly combines taking observations into account from the individuals' viewpoint and according to their judgment ability, and a critical approach integrating factors which do not always appear to actors, such as social determinatives.

#### *Limits as regards the relationship between actors and researchers*

A number of limits may however be identified. The first one corresponds to a problem of scientific legitimacy, which I met repeatedly when conducting research in an associative framework. If this research position in close connection with action has granted me privileged field access, with the Adels opening a number of doors through its networks, such has not always been the case. The Adels is indeed identified as an activist, defending a certain conception of participatory democracy, which may prove problematic when meeting actors promoting another vision. Such was the case when I wanted to conduct an interview with the

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<sup>4</sup> For the “ZAC Paris Rive Gauche”, one of the last major urban operations still in progress in Paris, a permanent concertation committee has been set up since 1997, so that the associations then the neighbourhood councils are associated, alongside with institutional partners, with the discussions on the construction of the urban project.

officials of the Campana Eleb consulting firm, whose participatory method is disparaged within the association (Nez and Talpin 2010). The activist position of the Adels may thus have made contacts more difficult, which prompted me to adjust my entrance according to my interlocutors (putting on my associative hat or, more often, stressing my university background). In other cases, I was running the risk of being instrumentalised by the actors, for instance when a cabinet member of the elected in charge of local democracy in Paris insisted, within a sociological interview, for the association to publish an interview by the elected official in its journal. The question raised, as soon as field actors are input into the scientific production, relates to the researcher's autonomy. The critical distance ability is an essential element to adopt a global approach to participatory practices, which incidentally was acknowledged by the majority of participants to the training sessions and to the Picri conferences, enjoying the opportunity given to them to take distance where they often feel as if they were "blindfolded". I came across this difficulty in particular on one of my fields, where the research report prepared in the Picri context was censored by the elected official, since he did not value the actions of his delegation enough. The aim of this intermediate report was to compare the participatory practices of several territorial authorities run by the Communist Party in the Parisian region, whereas it was not in the interest of the local authority in question to emphasize the communist aspect of its management. Still, it was a local authority with which the Adels had executed several contracts, in the context of training sessions and of a conference which secured it a sizeable portion of its annual incomes<sup>5</sup>. This experience highlights the limits in carrying out a research in an associative context, when there are conflicts of interest between the economic constraints of an association, which operates for certain activities as a design office, and the independence required by research activities.

On top of these difficulties associated with the insertion of the Adels in the field of "participation practitioners" (Nonjon 2006), the main limit of our investigation device is the same that researchers blame the elected officials for implementing participatory practices based upon "selective listening", that is to say when they summarise the debates without giving decision power to the citizens. This conception of research is relatively conventional, since final interpretation rests with the sociologist, even if fed considerably by discussions with the practitioners. In the continuity of the reflections of the STS (Science, Technology and Society) studies about the implication of the groups in the decisions which concern them (Epstein 1995; Wynne 1996; Callon, Lascoumes and Barthe 2001; Barbot 2002; Collins and Evans 2002), it may be contemplated to involve the actors much earlier in the research collective, and not only when returning the results. This was partially the case with the Adels when defining the research axes and when selecting the fields, but the discussions between actors and researchers have remained limited to that phase, without initiating a permanent dialogue throughout the research preparation process. Nevertheless the employees and the activists of the Adels, far from being "laymen" on participatory democracy, may contribute to the research from their own expertise – in the same way as in the associations of AIDS activists, patients assert themselves as experts among the experts, by proposing new forms of clinical treatments experiments (Epstein 1995; Barbot 2002). Indeed, they are in possession of an "interactional expertise", that means "they have enough expertise to interact interestingly with participants and carry out a sociological analysis" (Collins and Evans 2002: 254). Starting from the technical democracy model, several ways to imply actors could thus be imagined in the very research production process, so that actors exert real influence on the elaboration of the problematic, the formulation of hypotheses or still the redirection of research under investigation.

Finally, if it enriches the analysis and motivates the carrying out of research, the double hat as a sociologist and an activist is not free of tensions and of contradictions. It is not only the classic question of the distance from our "prenotions" or "values" – amply discussed by the literature since the works of Emile Durkheim and Max Weber – which arises, but more especially that of the conflicts between the values indispensable to any militant commitment and the process of research. As phrased perfectly by Bernard Lahire (2004: 60), "the action rationale requires unshakable faith, whereas the knowledge rationale may sometimes drive towards certain disenchantment of the world". I was confronted with this difficulty when writing

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<sup>5</sup> This question is all the more acute within the framework of the Adels, which has faced financial difficulties for several years, which have led to a liquidation of the association in 2012.

my PhD: activist commitment requires strong conviction in an object which scientific research desecrates little by little. If my initial look at European experiments in participatory democracy was not naive, it still remained enthusiastic. A growing doubt however crept as the field survey unfurled, on the scope of the participatory processes as well as on the researcher's role in the development of these experiments, which is partially linked to my study cases. In Cordoba, the municipal team abandoned the participatory budget eight years after its launch, following an eventful history which led to revise down the objectives of political equality and of social justice. In Paris, whereas participatory democracy was at the heart of Bertrand Delanoë's programme in 2001, its prominence was only marginal during the 2008 elections. The sociological analysis thus reveals the degree of discrepancy between the participatory ideal advocated by the Adels in its manifesto (Adels 2010) and the practices effectively implemented in the European context.

### **A typology of public sociology postures on participatory democracy**

During this research on participatory democracy in an associative context, I maintained various relationships with the action. I mainly tried to lead the research in permanent interaction with the actors and to put in debate the results of my researches with the investigated, in a perspective of "public sociology" such as defines it Burawoy and as I previously commented it. But I also took part in public or internal debates organized by public institutions, political parties or associations, as an academic expert (what can sometimes get closer the posture of "policy sociology" in the typology of Burawoy), contributed to the training sessions of local elected representatives, or helped the inhabitants to build an argument to assert their point of view in front of public authorities. To question the researchers' social role and their impact in the development of participatory practices, it's important to distinguish these various activities which join several postures of public sociology. The elaboration of a typology allows us to go beyond the general definition proposed by Burawoy and to enter the multiplicity of the positions which maintain with the action the researchers working on participatory democracy. The objective is to clarify what we understand by "public sociology" on this particular object and to estimate its impact both on the research and on the development of participatory practices, according to the degree of commitment of the researchers in the action.

To elaborate this typology, I shall lean not only on my personal experience within the Picri programme, but also on other research programmes in Europe. It is a question of giving a more general reach to my typology, by analyzing the researches led by centres particularly active on participatory democracy. This selection is not exhaustive, but it allows to have a relatively wide panel of the European researches on this theme. To choose these study cases, I retained several criteria: the realization of sociological researches on local participatory practices, the diversity of institutional and scientific contexts in Europe, the implication of the researchers in the action and/or in reflexivity towards the action, as well as a context of collaboration with public institutions, associations or other citizens groups. The objective was to extrapolate my own observations led within the framework of the Adels and both centres of the CNRS by diversifying the scientific traditions and the institutional contexts. I so observed the methods used by the researchers working on participatory democracy in four European research centres: the Institute of advanced social studies (IESA) in Cordoba, the Centre for Social Studies in Coimbra, the Centre Marc Bloch in Berlin and the University La Sapienza in Rome. The observation was facilitated by the fact that these researchers were involved for the majority in the Picri programme, what allowed me to exchange with them during numerous scientific demonstrations (both conferences organized by the PICRI in 2008 and 2009, but also five international conferences from 2008 till 2011) and numerous stays of study (two short-term stays in Rome and in Berlin, and five stays of four months in all in Cordoba, from 2006 till 2010). We exchanged around our practices of investigation during scientific discussions intended to develop reflexivity on the relations between research and action, and in more informal discussions.

In a Weberian perspective, the goal of the typology is to establish semi-abstract ideals, knowing that these unreal constructions do not meet as such in reality and that combinations are possible between the various types (Weber, 1947). If the distinction of various sociologists'



positions on participatory democracy aims at clarifying the analysis by simplifying reality, my stand within the Picri programme and my PhD show that a researcher can evolve between these various roles, in function of the expected results from the point of view of the research and the action. I suggest distinguishing five typical ideals which are as many distinct ways to do research in collaboration with the actors on participatory democracy, knowing that the researchers often combine several postures: the "dialogist sociologist", the "organizer sociologist", the "practitioner sociologist", the "expert sociologist" and the "*compagnon de route* sociologist". If the "dialogist sociologist" try to establish a dialogue and a process of mutual education with his public, the "organizer sociologist" does not limit to put in debate the results of his researches but he integrates the actors into the collective of research, whereas the "practitioner sociologist" takes part directly himself in the action as an internal or external consultant, by using methods originating from social sciences. The last two postures, those of the "expert sociologist" and the "*compagnon de route* sociologist", join more a role of advice towards the actors, in a contractual or militant relation. These various postures so distinguish themselves according to the degree of commitment of the researchers in the action (from a position of dialogue to a direct implication to activities of organization and advice), the type of commitment (academic, professional, activist), the nature of their relationships with the practitioners (formal or not, contractual, friendly, etc.), the place dedicated to the research in their approach (as the main objective or as a tool for the action) and their impact on the action (more or less strong and direct).

The distinction of these various postures aims at developing the typology of Burawoy from the specificities of researches on participatory democracy, by being interested in the forms that set both "public sociology" and "policy sociology" in this object of study. I shall not develop here the position of the "pure scientist" (who corresponds to the postures of "professional sociology" and "critical sociology" in Burawoy's typology), rather to be recognised by one's peers than to have some influence on the reality he studies, since sociologists working on participatory democracy are often involved in their object and/or their research fields<sup>6</sup>. This specificity of the thematic of participatory democracy can be not only understandable by the profile and the trajectory of the researchers who choose to work on this question, by crossing a scientific approach and a political reflection even an activist commitment, but also by the interest which the actors show towards the research led on this theme, by reading the work of the researchers and by seeking expertise within the framework of their activities. Thus, here as on militant fields, the distance to the object and the place the researcher occupies within the studied environment are chosen not only by himself, but also co-built by the group (Broqua 2009).

#### *The dialogist sociologist*

The "dialogist sociologist" corresponds to the definition of "public sociologist" by Burawoy in its "organic" version. He initiates a mutual dialogue and learning process with his public: "In the same genre of what I call *traditional public sociology* we can locate sociologists who write in the opinion pages of our national newspapers where they comment on matters of public importance. [...] There is, however, another type of public sociology – *organic public sociology* in which the sociologist works in close connection with a visible, thick, active, local and often counter-public. [...] Between the organic public sociologist and a public is a dialogue, a process of mutual education" (Burawoy 2005: 7-8). The main activity of this kind of public sociology hence consists in initiating a dialogue between sociologists and their public, which implies an epistemological split and especially allows returning scientific research results: "We have spent a century building professional knowledge, translating common sense into science, so that now, we are more than ready to embark on a systematic back-translation, taking knowledge back to those from whom it came, making public issues out of private, and thus regenerating sociology's moral fibre" (Burawoy 2005: 5).

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<sup>6</sup> Researches can be certainly led in this perspective on local participatory processes, but, given the angle of my paper, I focus here on sociologists' postures looking deliberately for a link with the local actors and an impact on the action.

It is the main stance we adopted in the context of the Picri programme and which I followed when writing my PhD, whereas these approaches are characterised by two features, as we could see: the sociologist carries out research in close connection with field actors and organizes public debates about his results. As I described it in the first part of this paper, a dialogue between actors and researchers was organized at several stages of the research manufacturing process. It is also this posture of research that prevails among the researchers working on participatory democracy in the Centre Marc Bloch, in Berlin, and in the University La Sapienza, in Rome. When they observe experiments of participatory budgets in the Berlin region, processes of participatory town planning in a district of Berlin or a participatory budget in a district of Rome, these researchers lead a work by immersing themselves in the field (often developing long-term ethnographical inquiries, which sometimes brings them to live on their research field), to maintain narrow relations with the institutional and social actors. They put then in debate the results of their researches to return their works to their investigated and to begin a discussion with the members of institutions, foundations, associations and/or citizens groups. It is, for example, the approach that followed Carsten Herzberg and Cécile Cuny when they led researches on the participatory budgets in Lichtenberg and in Postdam on the one hand, on the participatory practices in the district of Marzahn Nord on the other hand (Cuny and Herzberg 2008, Cuny 2009).

This practice of public sociology is founded on alternating moments when researchers discuss among themselves, in a "confined" conception of research in laboratories, and others when sociological knowledge is discussed "outdoors" (Callon, Lascoumes and Barthe 2001). It is not thus a question of eliminating the experts, but of organizing a cooperative research between specialists and "laymen", by establishing spaces of dialogue between "those the job is to produce knowledge and those who are the immediate or unknown public" (Callon, Lascoumes and Barthe 2001: 67). As the theoreticians of technical democracy define it: "To speak about outdoor research, it is to underline a shape of commitment in which prevail the formulation of the problems, the modalities of application of knowledge and the produced know-how, as well as the necessary opening of the research collective" (Callon, Lascoumes and Barthe 2001: 149). This new form of organization and integration of research in society allows investigating new ways of research, which may integrate demands of which the researchers would not have thought before. This alternation between laboratory research and outdoor research enables us to combine activist commitment and scientific distancing at the same time, that is to say to take the actors' discourses seriously (Boltanski and Thévenot 1991) and to maintain an autonomous production of the research.

### *The organizer sociologist*

The "organizer sociologist" offers another way of doing research, wherein actors join the research collective. In this case, it is not the researcher who observes and interprets reality, but the sociologist creates a process for the actors themselves to be able to observe and interpret their reality. This design of "research-action" has developed in France in the late 1970s around the concept of "sociological intervention", promoted by the team of Alain Touraine in the Centre for sociological analysis and intervention (French acronym CADIS). Its aim is not only to produce a sociological analysis, but also to increase actors reflexivity and to help them get organized: "To talk about intervention instead of experimentation is to pursue an action at the same time as a knowledge goal" (Touraine 1978: 188). The approach of sociological intervention presents however various limits in the French context, so much from the point of view of the cooperation between actors and researchers (at the end, there are the sociologists who write and not the actors), that results on action, which are reduced in the majority of cases.

The situation is different in Latin America and in Spain, where the research-action method has had notable influence in the training of participatory democracy practitioners. In 1996, sociologist Tomas R. Villasante, who has written several books on participatory democracy and social transformation (Villasante 1995; 2006), has created a Master's class in "Research and participatory action" at the Complutense University of Madrid, intended for students and local authorities practitioners. His objective was to teach new work methodologies on participation, based upon Paulo Freire's pedagogy (1974) and the

participatory research-action developed in the 1970s-1980s in Latin America, according to which citizens themselves decide on the possible alternatives to the problems they share. In this respect, this position of research can be moved closer to the Gramsci notion of "organic intellectual", as far as "the [organic] intellectual has to be thought-provoking, for the members of the class with which he is organically bound, raising their awareness of their community of interests and creating within this class a conception of the homogeneous and autonomous world" (Piotte, 1970: 19). The Master's classes set up in Madrid, but also in Barcelona, Sevilla and Bilbao, have had considerable importance for participatory practices in Spain: more than half the experiments in participatory budget, for example, initially hired people who had been trained there (Ganuza 2010: 34)<sup>7</sup>. Members of two research centres I studied organized training sessions in participatory budgets by joining this approach of research-action. In Cordoba, Ernesto Ganuza (a former student of Villasante) set up participatory methodologies to train the agents and the representatives of the first model of participatory budget (from 2001 till 2003). In the Centre of Social Studies in Coimbra, Giovanni Allegretti organized training sessions for the municipalities wishing to create a participatory budget, on the basis of Paulo Freire's pedagogy. By inciting cities to set up such processes, these trainings sessions contributed to the increase of these devices in Portugal, which passed from about ten in 2009 to thirty four in June 2011 (Allegretti 2011).

We have not adopted this research-action position in the context of our Picri programme, since there is a risk of role confusion between actors and researchers. It exhibits the advantage of going further in associating actors to the production of research, but this impact on action is sometimes detrimental to the quality of research. If Master's class in Spain have had an undeniable impact on the quality of methodologies used in participatory processes, the results in terms of scientific research are not as convincing, and it was not moreover the main objective set forth by Villasante. In France, this method was used as a part of another Picri programme entitled "Renewing the practices of urban project conception: for a closer monitoring and a stronger cooperation between the town practitioners, the associations and the citizens in the Parisian region", with whom we organized the conference on citizen's knowledge as part of the urban issue in 2009. Under the leadership of Agnès Deboulet, this programme was conducted in collaboration with CNRS laboratories specialised in urban studies, the International Association of Technicians, Experts and Researchers (AITEC) and tenants committees. Research-action approach has enabled to consolidate groups of inhabitants and prompted researchers to join their struggle, especially the coordination against the demolition of working class areas. Nevertheless, the shortcoming was to make more difficult, let alone impossible, access to certain pieces of information held by institutional actors, whereas researchers were seen as on the inhabitants' side.

### *The practitioner sociologist*

Sometimes in connection with the occupational training sessions which we have just tackled, the researcher may become directly involved in the setting up of participatory processes, by using methods originating from social sciences. It is then a "practitioner sociologist" who has played a direct role in the action by taking on, for example, responsibilities inside a local administration or by intervening as an external consultant. If his involvement enables to set up innovative participatory practices, the sociologist is often challenged when developing a critical approach to a process which he contributes to implementing. It is, for example, the stance adopted by Ernesto Ganuza, which played a consultant role with the municipality of Cordoba in setting up a participatory budget on the basis of participatory methodologies. Employed by the municipality, he has played a decisive role in the setting up and the definition of the methodology of the first model of participatory budget in Cordoba. Then, as a researcher in the Institute of advanced social studies (IESA), he organized deliberative polling on the practice of the *botellón* in Cordoba (Cuesta et al. 2008) and on water management in the Andalusian region (Ganuza, Garrido, Lafuente 2009; Jorba 2009). Within the framework of another form of participatory device, the Italian researchers involved in the Picri have initiated in 2006 the creation of a "Citizen Town Hall" in

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<sup>7</sup> Former students of Tomas R. Villasante have recently published a methodological guide on this research-action method applied to participatory practices (Ganuza et al., 2011).

the first district of Rome (the historical centre), which is a public place for informing, debating and presenting propositions on the elaboration of the Local urbanism plan of the capital city (Cellamare 2006). The researchers played a full role in the implementation of this Citizen Town Hall, by giving a scientific guarantee and by offering to the local associations and to the district administration a cultural, technical and organizational support. In these cases, the sociologist takes part in the action as a practitioner and is involved with the public authorities, more than a sociologist expert from an external position.

This practitioner sociologist posture is shared by the researchers who experiment innovative methods as part of participatory processes randomly selected, such as citizens' juries and deliberative polling. The *Planungszellen* (planning units) and *citizens' juries* were invented in the early 1970s by two fully-fledged sociologists, with a few months interval in Germany and in the United States. In the same quest for new democratic forms of town planning, Peter Dienel (1978) and Ned Crosby (2003) created a process for a small group of randomly selected citizens to deliberate on a public policy issue and to formulate, having received pieces of information from specialists, a series of recommendations. Once this university experimentation has moved into the field of local participatory democratic practices, the researchers have continued to play an essential role, in the organisation of the procedure, the guarantee of information pluralism and the smooth proceeding of the debates. Their role is similar in the context of deliberative polling, a procedure engineered by the American politist James Fishkin (1995) in the early 1990s, consisting in using the opinion poll method (i.e. the selection of a sample representative of the population) and in organising for several days a debate between the selected people, on the basis of pluralist information, so as to enable each participant to voice an informed opinion on a given topic. These positions are at the origin of a particular commitment of the sociologist, which privileges the effects of his methodologies focusing on the action to the quality of the scientific research.

#### *The expert sociologist*

Being less involved in the action, the "expert sociologist" advises the actors, along a conception of sociological expertise guided by the client's request. His implication in the action is less extended than in the case of the practitioner sociologist, it is often about punctual interventions with a public institution to give advice about their participatory policies or to propose an evaluation of them. This conception of the expert sociologist, if it often corresponds to a will to diffuse the research experience on participatory democracy to the institutional actors, gets closer to Burawoy's conception of policy sociology: "Policy sociology is sociology in the service of a goal defined by a client. Policy sociology's *raison d'être* is to provide solutions to problems that are presented to us, or to legitimate solutions that have already been reached" (Burawoy 2005: 9). On participatory democracy, sociologists are often invited by local communities to intervene as "university experts", to present their work, to summarise debates during actors meetings or to take part in assessment authorities of the processes – we prefer to use here the term of "expert sociology" rather than that of "policy sociology" to emphasize this dimension of expertise typical of sociological research. This position secures privileged field access and better knowledge of the actors' opinions, by multiplying "off-the-record" discussions outside official interviewing situations, but there is a risk of instrumentalisation by some actors (especially by the institutional ones) and of losing credibility with others (the associative actors and citizens involved in participatory processes).

This posture is punctually adopted by the majority of the researchers on the sites I analyzed, in particular by Giovanni Allegretti who is requested in every corner of the world to communicate its expertise on participatory budgets (with local authorities, international institutions, associative and citizens groups, etc.). I also adopted it repeatedly within the framework of my researches. As I had been conducting my research in the 20<sup>th</sup> borough of Paris for a year and a half, I was thus invited by the new municipal team to partake in a restricted think tank on the evolution of local democracy, as a university expert. The aim of the work group composed of local elected members, of neighbourhood councillors and of two experts (Julien Talpin and myself) was to write out a new neighbourhood councils Charter. The group met some ten times from May to July 2008, by auditioning key participation actors in several Parisian boroughs and other cities, and by debating internally. The integration of this

restricted group has proven quite interesting for my research, since it has secured me access behind the scenes of municipal power (especially the discussions inside the mayor's cabinet), where I could appreciate certain lively debates which were not expressed publicly. However, the elected official in charge of participatory democracy borrowed our scientific justification of random selection as a means to attract new public and to diversify the participants' sociology, to push through a reform to increase the prominence of randomly selected members in the neighbourhood councils of the 20<sup>th</sup> borough<sup>8</sup>. Still, he was not too keen to broaden participation to other social categories, whereas the main thing was to differentiate from the participatory practices of the previous mayor, and especially to reduce the role of counter-power acquired by certain neighbourhood councils. The impact of our sociological expertise on action has not only been reduced, possibly harmful, whereas the neighbourhood councils have sharply declined under that mandate in the 20<sup>th</sup> borough, but our intervention was also rather badly perceived by some neighbourhood councillors and associative actors, which may then thwart field access.

### *The "compagnon de route" sociologist*

Finally, the researchers' involvement with local actors, institutions or citizens' groups, is sometimes more akin to an activist than a contractual position. We are then talking of a "*compagnon de route* sociologist", with reference to the position of the intellectuals who accompanied the Communist parties in Europe, by sharing a number of ideas, but without taking out a membership card – this affinity has been present in the two occidental countries which had a powerful Communist party after the Second World War, in France and in Italy. This committed position with participatory democracy practitioners facilitates field access and boosts contribution to action, at the risk however of losing face before other actors (for example the institutional actors when getting involved with an association or a social movement). This perspective of a friendly support of the sociologists with actors ideologically close is frequently adopted by the researchers who work on participatory democracy in the research centres I selected in Europe. It is the case in particular of Carsten Herzberg, when he analyzed the participatory budgets in the Berlin region while contributing to define the outlines an academic expert and a political militant invested locally, or of numerous French and foreign researchers who followed the experience of the participatory budget of high schools in the Region Poitou-Charentes (Sintomer, Talpin 2011).

It's also with this perspective in mind, I've been involved in the local group of the Greens in the 20<sup>th</sup> borough or in a citizen's collective in Belleville. In Belleville, the members of the collective for revaluation of the neighbourhood, whose meetings and activities I attended for more than a year, have gradually prompted me to become more than a simple observer, by challenging me on issues of methodology (to elaborate, for example, a questionnaire for collecting the opinion of passers-by on the condition of the Belleville boulevard). I thus accompanied the group in some of its activities, while bringing a sociological look, as I continued to observe it in the context of my research. On the other hand, Green activists invited me to present my research at several stages of its progress, at their weekly debates. I thus presented the first findings derived from a one-year field investigation on the Parisian neighbourhood councils, in 2007, which enabled me to engage in an enriching dialogue with certain participants. A neighbourhood councillor, incidentally a Green activist, for instance drew my attention on the unequal social distribution of occupational knowledge within such a local participation process. In 2011, I spoke again, as a part of a "citizen training" cycle on participatory democracy, which enabled me to return the results of my PhD to a number of actors met on the field. Generally speaking, I often reply positively to the requests from actors involved in participatory democracy, especially in the context of training sessions for elected members (above all the Communist Party in France), whereas the objective is to develop the social usefulness of my researches by tempting to influence their practices.

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<sup>8</sup> In the 20<sup>th</sup> borough, the neighbourhood councils had been composed, since their creation in 1995, of three colleges: one third of political activists, one third of associative officials and one third of citizens randomly selected on electoral rolls. In 2008, the proportion of randomly selected neighbourhood councillors went up to 51%.

### *A difficult just term between commitment and distance*

By varying the degrees and the modes of the researcher's commitment in action, these five postures produce different results as regards research as well as practices. They show the difficulties for the sociologist to maintain a critical distance with respect to their object of study from the moment the research work goes hand in hand with commitment with practitioners. Indeed, the researcher runs the risk of becoming auxiliary to a movement or a politics and the actual effects on discourses and participatory practices are not always the same than the expected ones. However, if the risk is to serve as a scientific support for the elected officials to legitimise their practices, sometimes quite far from the objectives put forward, these postures typical of a sociologist committed to action also show that research may have social effectivity.

From my viewpoint, the stake is to develop a sociology on participatory democracy which is both *critical and committed*, so as to contribute to the political debate and the public action through the ability to critical distance. I agree with Philippe Corcuff (2004: 176), when he suggests outlining "a direction where commitment rests on the achievements of now autonomous social sciences". In the face of the Weberian opposition between Science and Politics Vocation, which distinguishes two kinds of completely heterogeneous problems (Weber, 1919), the idea is to "consider both tensions and bridges between the scientist's ethics and the activist's ethics, by giving up on dreams of purification" (Corcuff 2004: 181). As stated in turn by Lahire (2004: 59, 65), from another epistemological position which defends the specificity of scientific skills<sup>9</sup>, "It only remains to consider the concrete routes through which the sociologists may, without killing or weakening the scientist inside them, usefully contribute to reflection and public action". The idea is then to combine a public and a critical sociology approach, which are according to Burawoy (2005: 10) the "conscience" of policy sociology and of professional sociology, to continue to develop reflexive knowledge on participatory democracy. Contribution to the political debate and to the public action thus is based on a position which is committed but autonomous with respect to the political and social field.

### **Conclusion**

With regard to my experience of research in an associative context and to the various postures the sociologists develop on participatory democracy, I would like to underline the interest, from a scientific point of view, from a strong commitment in the participatory practices we observe. A position of public sociology allows at first to have an access to the field and, more particularly, behind the public scenes, in which we have access only when we are implicated in the action. And often, the most interesting takes place in these exchanges behind the public scenes, which observation allows also understanding what happen in the public scenes. The collaboration with the actors also allows to enrich our works of the reflexivity they can develop on their practices, and to elaborate so new categories of analysis. The question which arises is however the autonomy of the researcher and the possibility of maintaining a capacity of critical distance. We can observe effects of censorship by our institutional interlocutors, but also of autocensorship, when we do not want to hurt actors who are close us or to depreciate an initiative closed to our heart. The risk is so to minimize the critical dimension of our works, knowing that they are going to be read by the others: by those we observe and we support the cause, and by those who are opposed to the participatory practices we study and could use these works to criticize them. The double hat of researcher and activist can also make each of both positions more difficult to hold, the development of the research leading in a certain disenchantment of the world. In spite of these limits, it seems to me that the game is worth the candle from the point of view of the scientific research.

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<sup>9</sup> Far from the clear separation between "social sociology" and "experimental sociology" presented by Lahire, Corcuff suggests, as I have tried to do it in my research, to "think at the same time resemblances *and* differences, continuities *and* discontinuities between professional sociology and actors' sociology, *but also* interrelations (thus in both directions: the formalization of concepts from common cognitive-discursive plans and the usage by the actors of notions coming from the social sciences)" (Corcuff 2004: 188-189).

But what is the impact on the political action? An approach of public sociology allows mainly proposing a critical analysis of a participatory initiative, to help the actors to stand back on their own practices. The critical analysis is not certainly reserved for the researchers, some practitioners producing an important reflexivity on their action, but the research can facilitate this taking of critical distance. Another contribution in the action can be appreciated in terms of dissemination of methods and experiences: the research can allow a methodological equipment and a capitalization of the experiences. The training sessions organized by the Adels within the Picri programme played this role with actors invested on participatory democracy in the Parisian region. In the same way, in Spain, the researchers played an important role in the adoption of participatory practices by the local authorities but also by some social movements, by spreading methods originating from social sciences. From its emergence in mid-May 2011, some students of Master's degrees on participatory methodologies participated in the movement of the *Indignados*, by moderating big assemblies, and influenced their functioning by the diffusion of methodological guides which circulated in the militant circles (Lorenzana, Basagoiti, Bru 2001 ; Lorenzo, Martínez 2001). The effects of a public research on participatory democracy can so go beyond the institutional sphere and come to strengthen the social movements.

There are however conditions so that the research can have an impact on the action. The first one is the existence of spaces of dialogue between actors and researchers at the various moments of the research, not only at the time of returning of the results to the investigated, but also during the formulation of the problems and the elaboration of the first hypotheses. Beyond the space of the ethnographical research, it is necessary to establish specific spaces to create this dialogue, what allow modes of financing which aim at developing partnerships between research laboratories and associations, as the Picri programmes. "Confined" research doesn't transform itself into "outdoor" research just like that. In the context of an increasing precariousness of the associations in number of European countries, it requires financial means to create spaces to establish a dialogue between interlocutors who are not still used to working together. The second condition is that the researcher integrates, in his activities and his objectives, the diffusion of his researches beyond the academic circles. To develop itself in the scientific field, public sociology thus requires a transformation of the academic rules, which often privilege the diffusion of the works in reviews only read by his peers or in conferences closed to the general public<sup>10</sup>, so that they value in the academic careers the other manners to lead and to spread the research.

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<sup>10</sup> On the difficulties reconciling intellectual work and anti-establishment action in the academic middle, see the stimulant article of Pierre Rimbart (2011).

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### **Abstract**

*This paper develops a reflexive approach on the relations between research and action on participatory democracy, where bridges are numerous between academic, political and activist fields. It aims at analysing the impact of the close links between sociologists and actors on the methods and results of the research and, reciprocally, the role of sociology in the development of participatory practices. Relying on Michael Burawoy's reflection on "public sociology", on our own research experience in an association and on other researches in Europe, we defined five ways to carry out research on participatory democracy in collaboration with the actors. Beyond a reflection on the social reception of our researches, the challenge is to develop a critical and committed sociology on participatory democracy, to contribute to the political debate and to the public action from a critical viewpoint.*

### **Keywords:**

*Participatory democracy, social sciences epistemology, research-action, critical sociology.*

**Título en español: Para una sociología pública sobre democracia participativa. Reflexiones sobre una investigación realizada en una asociación.**

### **Resumen**

Este artículo desarrolla un enfoque reflexivo sobre las relaciones entre investigación y acción en los trabajos sobre democracia participativa, una temática donde las pasarelas son numerosas entre los campos académicos, políticos y militantes. El objetivo es analizar el impacto de las relaciones estrechas entre sociólogos y actores en los métodos y resultados de la investigación y, recíprocamente, el papel de la sociología en el desarrollo de las prácticas participativas. Apoyándose en la reflexión de Michael Burawoy sobre la "sociología

pública”, en nuestra propia experiencia de investigación en una asociación y en otras investigaciones en Europa, se definen cinco posturas de sociólogos que trabajan en colaboración con los actores sobre la democracia participativa. Más allá de una reflexión sobre la receptividad social de nuestras investigaciones, el desafío es desarrollar una sociología a la vez crítica y comprometida sobre la democracia participativa, para contribuir al debate político y a la acción pública a partir de una capacidad de distancia crítica.

**Palabras clave:**

Democracia participativa, epistemología de las ciencias sociales, investigación-acción, sociología crítica.