

## **Bearded women: feminist activism in « La Barbe » as a form of informal adult learning**

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### Introduction

Based on our experiences as lecturers and trainers in vocational training on local and international development, our students/participants are mainly people politically aware or committed activists. As for us, we are involved to varying degrees in different organisations which have in common a collective dimension: feminist movements and networks, cultural associations, local development boards, NGOs. Our strong interest in learning, adult education and transmission processes, led us to examine how the involvement in such organisations influences individual paths, and if this commitment turns out to be a source of learning, if it holds the capacity of operating individual transformations, especially in terms of "powers". In the sense of Harraway and Harding<sup>1</sup>, our « standpoint » is not neutral, but clearly situated regarding our own activist experience.

Our research focuses on the learning processes that take place for the members of one of the recent feminist organisation: La Barbe. This French movement<sup>2</sup> differs from other relatively recent feminist movements by its mode of action.<sup>3</sup> Founded by feminist activists in the wake of the 2007 presidential campaign, which had spurred sexism against Ségolène Royal, the first and only female candidate bearing serious election chances, La Barbe started as an activist movement in 2008.

Through targeted action, activists interfere in places of power during particular events, wearing a false beard in order to pinpoint - in an ironic manner - the persistence of male power hegemony and to make visible the numeric and symbolic domination of men in these places. La Barbe thus refers to a symbol of virility – the beard – and draws on an expression used in vernacular language in which a verbal form of the word beard is used to express a feeling of exasperation<sup>4</sup>. La Barbe turns this expression into a pun conspicuously staged. The activists – women only – ironically "congratulate" the assembly for participating in the perpetuation of male domination in society and resisting the feminisation of public life. These public appearances of La Barbe are then covered and communicated by the media, press, television and social networks but also

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<sup>1</sup> Haraway, Donna, (1988), « Situated knowledges: the science question in Feminism and the privilege of partial perspective », in : *Feminist Studies*, 14, no. 3, pp. 575-599.

Harding, Sandra (Ed.). (1987). « *Feminism and methodology* ». Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

<sup>2</sup> We use the word organisation and movement as synonyms in the present text, disregarding the possible conceptual distinctions.

<sup>3</sup> In France, we can mention: "Osez le féminisme"; and at an international (and very mediatised) level: "Femen". Whereas the latter stages women's bodies, La Barbe uses masculine attributes.

<sup>4</sup> "Ça me barbe": "I have had enough of it" ; "La barbe de la barbe": "We have had enough of all these beards (=male domination)"

by videos made by the Barbues<sup>5</sup> and posted on their national website<sup>6</sup>.

The choice of this research topic is partly explained because of the personal experience of the authors, particularly interested in this movement. One of the authors is a member of La Barbe since 2010 and the other one knows some of the founding and active members personally, and has followed the evolution of the organisation since its creation. Furthermore, the interesting mode of action - work in local groups, ironic and provocative public appearances around a key symbol of masculinity that is the beard, strong use of media and social networks - justifies the choice of this particular example of a feminist movement. Throughout this research, we seek to analyse the informal learning effects resulting from a militant engagement in this organisation only, without resorting to comparisons with other forms of feminist engagement.

### Conceptual framework

In order to study the effect of formative involvement in La Barbe, we refer to the definition of informal learning proposed by Schugurensky (2000)<sup>7</sup>:

Informal learning takes place outside the curricula provided by formal and non-formal educational institutions and programs. In the concept of 'informal learning', it is important to note that we are deliberately using the word 'learning' and not 'education', because in the processes of informal learning there are no educational institutions, institutionally authorized instructors or prescribed curricula. It is also pertinent to note that we are saying 'outside the curricula of educational institutions' and not 'outside educational institutions', because informal learning can also take place inside formal and non-formal educational institutions. In that case, however, the learnings occur independently (and sometimes against) the intended goals of the explicit curriculum (p. 2).

The assumption that activist engagement is a source of informal learning is a component of a larger action-research project on how to teach participatory methods to professionals of sustainable development.<sup>8</sup>

We know that adult learners (for example in literacy programs in the US) consider that one of their educational objectives is to give voice to their ideas, trusting they will be heard.<sup>9</sup> Our research question aims to address the reversal of this evidence: is the action of giving voice to one's ideas in public space an experience of informal learning?

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<sup>5</sup> "Barbues" means "bearded women", the members of La Barbe use this term to refer to themselves.

<sup>6</sup> [www.labarbelabarbe.org](http://www.labarbelabarbe.org)

<sup>7</sup> Schugurensky, Daniel (2000), "The forms of informal learning: Towards a conceptualization of the field", WALL Working Paper No.19, The Research Network on New Approaches to Lifelong Learning, Centre for the Study of Education and Work, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto (OISE/UT), Canada

(<https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/2733/2/19formsofinformal.pdf>), p. 2

<sup>8</sup> <http://chaireunesco.u-bordeaux3.fr/?Approches-participatives-comment>

<sup>9</sup> Stein, 1995, in : MEZIRROW, J. (1997), "Transformative Learning: Theory to Practice", in : NEW DIRECTIONS FOR ADULT AND CONTINUING EDUCATION, no. 74, Summer 1997, Jossey-Bass Publishers, p. 5-12.

The type of learning that can occur in this kind of context is best described by transformative learning developed by Mezirow (1997) since the 80s:

Transformative learning is the process of effecting change in a frame of reference. Adults have acquired a coherent body of experience—associations, concepts, values, feelings, conditioned responses—frames of reference that define their life world. Frames of reference are the structures of assumptions through which we understand our experiences. They selectively shape and delimit expectations, perceptions, cognition, and feelings. They set our “line of action.” Once set, we automatically move from one specific activity (mental or behavioural) to another. We have a strong tendency to reject ideas that fail to fit our preconceptions, labelling those ideas as unworthy of consideration—aberrations, nonsense, irrelevant, weird, or mistaken. When circumstances permit, transformative learners move toward a frame of reference that is more inclusive, discriminating, self-reflective, and integrative of experience (p. 5).<sup>10</sup>

In order to explore the question of the informal learning effect of feminist activism, we have chosen to refer to the theory of transformative learning. This theory is centred on the meaning of experience. Instead of assimilating non-critically explanations given by an authority figure, transformative learning develops the adult learner’s capacity to understand the meaning of his/her experience. Transformative learning develops autonomous thinking, which is crucial for women in the almost universal context of patriarchy (at different degrees). When reorganising the meaning of an event, the “lived situation” will be transformed into “experience”. This process is possible through personal development, socialisation and the reinforcement of the conscience of being a unique human being in a dynamic pluralistic world.<sup>11</sup>

A limit of using the theory of transformative education is that this concept applies above all to formal adult education. Taylor and Jarecke (2009) insist on the place and the role of the educator as a model for alternative beliefs and behaviours.<sup>12</sup> In the case of this research we are not at all in a setting of formal education. We therefore transpose Mezirow’s transformative education theory, looking for effects of transformative informal learning. Taking into account the importance of the educator in Mezirow’s approach, we can assume that the more long term members in a feminist organisation play a kind of educator role and that the strongly co-constructive and reflexive nature of the operation mode of La Barbe (see below) makes the co-members into peer-educators of informal learning.

Mezirow has not worked from a gender perspective<sup>13</sup>, but socially constructed gendered identities clearly qualify as “habits of mind”<sup>14</sup> one of the components within a reference

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<sup>10</sup> MEZIRROW, J. (1997), “Transformative Learning: Theory to Practice”, in : NEW DIRECTIONS FOR ADULT AND CONTINUING EDUCATION, no. 74, Summer 1997, Jossey-Bass Publishers, p. 5

<sup>11</sup> MEZIRROW, Jack, (2001), “Penser son expérience : une voie vers l’autoformation”, Chronique sociale, Lyon, France.

<sup>12</sup> TAYLOR, Edward W., JARECKE, Jodi (2009), cited in : ENGLISH, L.M., PETERS, N., (2012), “Transformative Learning in Nonprofit Organizations: A Feminist Interpretative Inquiry”, on : ADULT EDUCATION QUARTERLY, American Association for Adult and Continuing Education, SAGE, 62(2), p. 106.

<sup>13</sup> This is particularly astonishing as the original concept of transformation emerged from Mezirow’s 1978 study on women (ENGLISH, Leona M., PETERS, Nancy, (2012), “Transformative Learning in Nonprofit Organizations: A Feminist Interpretative Inquiry”, on: ADULT EDUCATION QUARTERLY, American Association for Adult and Continuing Education, SAGE, 62(2), p. 105).

framework (the other dimensions being a point of view). These elements are central to the social construction of gendered identities as well as shaping the self-image, the perceptions, the roles and ambitions of individuals in relation to the biological category they have been put into since their childhood. In order for women to become conscious of their habits of mind and the way these ways of thinking, feeling and acting have been structured on gendered lines, they have to put their frames of reference into question. Becoming aware of the way one has integrated and assimilated ones' gendered self-image, analysing how this self-image has influenced ones' choices – training, career, role in public and private life, etc. –, exploring alternative ways of living ones' feminine identity... all these are key stages towards developing a feminist conscience and a motivation for feminist activism. Generally, the gender approach invites self-reflection and retrospection on individual life stories and the way they have been modelled by social structures on gendered lines, which arguably overlaps with the psycho-developmental focus of the concept of transformative learning. There is also a social emancipatory element in transformative education, in the same way that feminism holds an empowering agenda.<sup>15</sup>

Another interesting link in the light of the operational mode of La Barbe (see below) is the great transformative learning potential of experiences that move the learners outside their comfort zones. Taylor and Jarecke<sup>16</sup> argue that it is unlikely for learners to seek discomfort. However, in the context of an activist engagement, this discomfort can be considered by the activist as a necessary challenge to face. The activist is therefore putting herself unintentionally in the posture of an informal learner.

Mezirow himself has mentioned participation in social action as one of the methods of transformative learning.<sup>17</sup> Taylor and Foley drew attention to the kind of transformation that can occur through informal learning in community based social movements.<sup>18</sup>

Considering that the feminist activists are women that feel that they are not usually heard enough in public space, the fact that they are publically giving voice to this idea is potentially an experience of informal learning.

English and Peters made a similar assumption in their interpretative research with 8 women from feminist non-profit organisations in Canada about their experience of transformative learning in these organisations.<sup>19</sup> Apart from the product of the activist work (e.g. the public intervention that are characteristic of La Barbe), it is the process of activist work and the internal working and decision-making procedures that are potentially a learning experience.

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<sup>14</sup> Habits of mind are broad, abstract, orienting, habitual ways of thinking, feeling, and acting influenced by assumptions that constitute a set of codes. These codes may be cultural, social, educational, economic, political, or psychological. Habits of mind become articulated in a specific point of view—the constellation of belief, value judgment, attitude, and feeling that shapes a particular interpretation (MEZIROW, J. (1997), p. 5-6).

<sup>15</sup> ENGLISH, L.M., PETERS, N., (2012), "Transformative Learning in Nonprofit Organizations: A Feminist Interpretative Inquiry", on : ADULT EDUCATION QUARTERLY, American Association for Adult and Continuing Education, SAGE, 62(2), p. 105.

<sup>16</sup> TAYLOR, JARECKE (2009), cited in : ENGLISH, L.M., PETERS, N., (2012), op. cit., p. 106.

<sup>17</sup> Mezirow and Associates, (1990), in : MEZIROW, J. (1997), "Transformative Learning: Theory to Practice", in : NEW DIRECTIONS FOR ADULT AND CONTINUING EDUCATION, no. 74, Summer 1997, Jossey-Bass Publishers, p. 5-12.

<sup>18</sup> TAYLOR (2009), FOLEY (1999), cited in: ENGLISH, L.M., PETERS, N., (2012), "Transformative Learning in Nonprofit Organizations: A Feminist Interpretative Inquiry", on : ADULT EDUCATION QUARTERLY, American Association for Adult and Continuing Education, SAGE, 62(2)103-119.

<sup>19</sup> ENGLISH, L.M., PETERS, N., (2012), op. cit., p. 103-119.

Mezirow listed the following conditions for transformative learning: those participating have full information; are free from coercion; have equal opportunity to assume the various roles of discourse (to advance beliefs, challenge, defend, explain, assess evidence, and judge arguments); become critically reflective of assumptions; are empathic and open to other perspectives; are willing to listen and to search for common ground or a synthesis of different points of view; and can make a tentative best judgment to guide action.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, many non-profit organisations and especially the feminist ones, are claiming to function according to such principles.

We chose to limit the analysis of the informal learning effect of feminist activism in La Barbe to the perspective of the concerned activists. Theoretically, the question of the learning effect of such advocacy could also be questioned as far as the targets of La Barbes' interventions are concerned. The transformation theory states that moral values – such as gender equality – are legitimised by agreement through discourse. The claim is that if everyone could participate in a discourse, under the ideal conditions of discourse, there would be a universal rational consensus concerning these values.<sup>21</sup> Advocacy can be considered as a form of engaging in such discourse, and research about its informal learning effect on the organisations targeted by the advocacy could give some insight on this kind of involuntary form of informal learning. But this perspective has not been taken into account in the present research.

Another element we have chosen not to consider specifically is the question of a potential specificity of women's ways of learning. The emphasis of supportive relationships in women-only settings (as it is the case in La Barbe) is an important theme in research about women's learning styles.<sup>22</sup> However, as we do not compare the informal learning of women in La Barbe to forms of informal learning in mixed groups or of male activists and as we seek to avoid a constructivist framework looking at women as a unique group, we do not focus on the idea of a female specificity in ways of learning, but rather on informal learning about gender.

#### Research questions, methodology, data collection and analysis

Bringing a focus on this notion of "meaning" into the reflective analysis of so-called informal learning situations, gives us a framework of analysis relevant to our quest to understand the "learning" dimension of the experiences within a feminist activist group. By deconstructing societal norms through the denunciation of male domination, La Barbe offers a new framework. As learning leads to a change of reference frames and patterns of meaning that allows us to assume that activism within La Barbe has an added value in form of transformative learning through changes of patterns and perspectives.

Our central hypothesis is that through the active engagement and sense of belonging to La Barbe, women attain higher levels of consciousness and acquire new skills that implicitly or explicitly allow them to move the lines of their lives in an individual and

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<sup>20</sup> MEZIROW, J. (1997), op. cit.

<sup>21</sup> MEZIROW, J. (1997), op. cit.

<sup>22</sup> BEAN, MEYER, DENNER (2004) and COOLEY (2007), cited in (ENGLISH, L.M., PETERS, N., (2012), op. cit.).

collective dimension. La Barbe is at the same time a source, a receiver and a reflector of the transformative learning. It is the "engine" of the learning dimension because the public denunciation of male domination represents a shift of the frame of reference built for years on conventional assumptions. The receiver dimension comes from the transformative potential that was there among the Barbues in a more or less obvious manner, depending on their life course (lesbian, divorced, with a feminist partner...). They joined La Barbe because they looked for such a receiver allowing them to question their frame of reference in a collective setting. La Barbe also has a potential reflector dimension of the transformative learning: the learning "gained" in La Barbe potentially reflects on the Barbues' individual and even private lives (e.g. the experience of speaking up in public or not lowering ones eyes in a verbal confrontation can be transferred to the professional or private lives of the Barbues, which proves that there has been individual change). These are the transformative learning dimensions of this form of activism that we wanted to identify.

Joining La Barbe is an activist commitment that has no learning objective in itself. Therefore, the research should allow to validate or invalidate the following hypothesis about the transformative effect of this militant practice:

- The mode of action of La Barbe is a form of determined conquest of public space - a form of "takeover" - which is very instructive as an experience, especially in relation to obstacles that women usually face concerning their place in the public space (professionally or otherwise).
- Through the denunciation of widespread and/or institutionalised discriminatory practices, the Barbues learn – on a collective and individual scale - to transgress the established codes.
- The democratic and collaborative nature of the operational mode of La Barbe (before, after and during the public appearances) greatly increases this effect and turns the collaboration with La Barbe into a learning experience.
- The "learning gained" from the activism with La Barbe is reinvested by the concerned women in their own lives (private, professional, emotional) for developing their skills and understanding of the context in which they operate by refining their critical thinking.

In order to verify these hypotheses, we launched a questionnaire through La Barbe's mailing list (see below).

For the purpose of the answers' analysis, we used the concept of different types of "power" used in the empowerment approach.

Empowerment is declined in 4 types of powers (Williams *et al*, 1994; Oxaal and Baden, 1997):

- *power over*: This power involves an either/or relationship of domination/subordination. Ultimately, it is based on socially sanctioned threats of violence and intimidation, it requires constant vigilance to maintain, and it invites active and passive *résistance*. The implications in practise are conflict and direct confrontation between powerful and powerless interest groups;
- *power to*: This power relates to having decision-making authority, power to solve problems and can be creative and enabling. Strengthening this type of power implies capacity building, supporting individual decision-making, leadership etc

- *power within (interior power)*: This power refers to self confidence, self awareness and assertiveness. It relates to how can individuals can recognise through analysing their experience how power operates in their lives, and gain the confidence to act to influence and change this. It involves increasing self-esteem, awareness or consciousness raising, confidence building.
- *power with*: This power involves people organising with a common purpose or common understanding to achieve collective goals. Social mobilisation, building alliances and coalitions will strengthen this kind of power.<sup>23</sup>

The notion of empowerment as it is used by the feminist movements<sup>24</sup> fits perfectly into the theory of transformative education: we are looking at the process of "gaining power" with different dimensions and the shift of frames of reference is central to the perception of empowerment by the concerned individuals. Furthermore, the empowerment approach includes an individual and a collective dimension, which is particularly relevant to research in the context of a feminist movement in which individual and collective transformations are strongly linked.

Mezirow's "habits of mind" shape - among other things - our psychological self-image, which is central to our interior power. As a result of transformative learning, these habits of mind shift and we become more aware of why we do or do not act in certain ways and consciously choose whether or not to revise our ideological frameworks.<sup>25</sup>

The process of acquiring powers reinforces the learning process by promoting the passage from incidental learning to intentional learning. The conscious analysis of the activism with its different phases (see below for La Barbe) and the growing awareness of the learning process are strengthening the individuals' "interior power". This dimension represents a Gordian knot in a transformative learning process. The reinforcement and stabilisation of this type of power is an essential ingredient in the process of the individuals' personal transformation.

The different types of power – namely the power to, within and with - are obviously related to each other and mutually reinforcing. Nevertheless, such a typology brings out different types of learning and allows for a classification of the answers to the questionnaires.

Our study seeks to understand how the learning process of the Barbues evolves, from the moment they chose to join La Barbe, until the inner transformation and the awareness of this transformation, in the sense of mindfulness (E. J. Langer, 1989), defined as a mindset of openness to novelty in which the individual actively constructs novel categories and distinctions.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> OXAAL Z., BADEN S. (1997), Gender and empowerment : definitions, approaches and implications for policy, BRIDGE, Briefing prepared for the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), Report n°40, p. 8. and

Williams et al (1994), in : OXAAL Z., BADEN S. (1997), Gender and empowerment : definitions, approaches and implications for policy, BRIDGE, Briefing prepared for the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), Report n°40, p. 1.

<sup>24</sup>International development agencies have used the empowerment approach since the Beijing conference in 1995 in a more depoliticised version, aiming only individual empowerment and tending to reduce it to gains in economic power (which refers to the integration of poor women in the market economy)

<sup>25</sup> CRANTON (2006), cited in ENGLISH, L.M., PETERS, N., (2012), op. cit.

<sup>26</sup> Langer, Ellen (1989). Mindfulness, Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Pub. Co. in: Pirson, Michael, Langer,

For the first phase of this research to be continued, a questionnaire was submitted to the active members of La Barbe to get them to share their perceptions and self-analysis about the learning effect of their militant commitment. The choice of an online questionnaire, with a combination of multiple choice questions as well as open questions and the possibility of freely choosing the indications made on the participants personal profile allowed for an anonymous participation and varying degrees of personal detail. In a next phase, this research can be carried further through semi-structured individual interviews.

By choosing a questionnaire, implicitly the choice was made to focus on "conscious" learning in the sense that learners are aware of the learning aspect of their activist commitment (despite the fact that a priori it was not their original intention when joining La Barbe). The comments of some respondents during the test phase indicate that this awareness may be at least partially the result of the questionnaire.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, it is possible that the act of submitting the questionnaire contributes to the informal learning effect because it stimulates a perception amongst the respondents that was not necessarily explicit before. The perception of the concerned individuals potentially acts like a filter. Subjective by nature, the personal perception can reduce the spectrum of learning effects that are identified. For example, one of the founding members emphasised some members' change in body postures of during La Barbies' public appearances. Very visible to her, the concerned individuals might not be conscious of this evolution.

#### Presentation of La Barbe, the context in which the informal learning takes place

"La Barbe" is a national informal movement composed of non-mixed regional groups: the movement decided not to comply to any formal status, which also allows to avoid legal measures against La Barbe from organisations, structures and institutions targeted by their public interventions. A formal association -"the Friends of La Barbe" - has however been created. It allows fundraising and is an open space for reflections and debates.

The information is shared through mailing lists for each of the 4 groups (West, Paris, Bordeaux, Toulouse). There is also a national mailing list (managed by the Paris group) that each Barbue can access by becoming a member of the Association of the Friends of La Barbe.

Each local group can explore its own way of functioning and a type of internal governance that suits the local members. The process of establishing the rules and procedures of each local group has been a learning experience in itself because it has stimulated discussion and exchange between different viewpoints.

One of the points of converging interest of all the Barbues is choosing the targets for their interventions. They seek to identify places of power where male domination is exercised. Another key element all members agree on is the use of irony as a specific signature of the Barbues' interventions. The irony is twofold: on the one hand, the out of date style (19th century) beards symbolise patriarchy and paternalism. On the other

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Ellen, Bodner, Todd, Zilcha, Sigal (2012), The Development and Validation of the Langer Mindfulness Scale - enabling a socio-cognitive perspective of mindfulness in organizational contexts, Social Science Research Network, Fordham University Schools of Business Research Paper, p. 3

<sup>27</sup> We received for example the following remarks: "I never asked myself this question before !", "I will have to think about this a bit longer...", etc.

hand, the participants distribute ironic leaflets to the public, in which La Barbe congratulates the men for their "achievements": remaining largely amongst themselves and taking a stand against the advancement of women in society. By preaching the opposite (e.g. the virtue of excluding women from powerful positions in the public sphere), les Barbues use humour to raise awareness about the facts they denounce (e.g. the recognition that women are still de facto excluded from powerful positions in the public sphere).

### The mode of action of La Barbe

In order to understand the learning effects of the investment in La Barbe, it is necessary to understand their mode of action.

The first phase is the preparation and the public intervention itself: The choice of targets for La Barbe's public appearances is based on a continuous monitoring of public events (through internet) or less public important events (e.g. the annual meeting of shareholders of a company<sup>28</sup>). Sympathetic non-members who share La Barbues' values might provide information on potential targets.

This choice is validated by the concerned group of La Barbe and the interventions are programmed and planned through discussions by email, phone and/or during monthly meetings. In general, once the target is identified and the decision to intervene is taken, the internal operating mode includes the following phases<sup>29</sup>:

- elaboration of the press release and the leaflet (photocopy),
- contacting the media at different levels (local, national,...),
- identification of the intervention's location (accessibility, how the group will be deployed in the place, etc.) through virtual means or by visiting the venue before the intervention,
- anticipation of the precise operating mode: when and how to access the venue to be seen and heard and to be able to leave the place "easily" after the appearance,
- choice of the reader of the leaflet who will read it out loud in front of the whole venue,
- preparation of the necessary material : banner, beards, leaflets

The casting is decided in a consensual manner, respecting the way that the women in the group want to allocate the roles according to their skills and desire.

The second phase is the public intervention and the following debriefing: during these appearances, the challenge is for the group to impose itself and for the reader to speak up without being neither invited nor expected, to read the ironic statement justifying intervention, while the other Barbues extend the banner of La Barbe. When leaving the venue, the Barbues distribute the paper copies of their statement.

After the event, an important debriefing phase takes place through an discussion between the participants who are invited to express themselves individually about what has been experienced, how they felt, what was pleasant or difficult, what lessons could be learned for future interventions.

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<sup>28</sup> This might imply that some members become shareholders themselves, in a minimalistic way.

<sup>29</sup> This description refers to the operating mode of the Bordeaux group



La Barbe of Bordeaux during the international Comic festival in Angoulême, 2013

The third phase - communication and dissemination - takes place after the public appearances. The dissemination of the press release, photos and videos (once they are edited) on social networks and on the website of La Barbe, enhances the visibility and public recognition. The interventions and the follow-up communication around the events represent a form of advocacy through "naming and shaming": they seek to inform the general public about these facts of gender-inequality in order to encourage the denounced actor to change. Finally archiving these products in the La Barbe website ([http://www.labarbelabarbe.org/La\\_Barbe/Actions/Archive.html](http://www.labarbelabarbe.org/La_Barbe/Actions/Archive.html)) allows an active capitalisation of the mobilisation and can play the role of cursor in measuring the evolution of gender relations in the public sphere.

#### Data collection

A questionnaire was conceived in order to address the members of La Barbe. It was tested and put online. This survey was announced on the website of La Barbe Paris. It contained the following questions:

1. Since when are you a member of La Barbe?
2. How many meetings of La Barbe have you participated in?
3. How many public interventions of La Barbe have you attended to?
4. Does the involvement within La Barbe have any learning effects (broadly defined in terms of self-image, concerning your activism or professional life, your posture in public space, etc.) on you?

If yes, which one:

In your opinion, what elements of La Barbe's mode of action (preparation, public intervention, debriefing,...) are most instructive for the aspects that you mentioned?

If not, please elaborate on your answer:

5. Thank you for sharing information about who you are (socio-professional category, age, activist career, other elements etc.):
6. Would you be willing to make yourself available for an interview by skype, phone or in person to further your answers with one of the interviewers?

## Analysis of the answers

After two reminders, we received 14 responses. Considering that the mailing list of Paris includes about a hundred women, half of which are active (at least one comment during discussions on the list), the response rate is of almost 30 (thirty) percent (14 out of 50).

The respondents are aged between 23 and 61 years, with the majority (6) being between 30 and 40.

| Age     |   |
|---------|---|
| 20 - 29 | 3 |
| 30 - 39 | 6 |
| 40 - 49 | 2 |
| 50 - 59 | 2 |
| > 60    | 1 |

The date of entry in La Barbe varies between 2008 (a founding member) and a person who has come to La Barbe only this year, with a balanced distribution (3 or 4) for the years 2010 to 2012 as years of entry.

| Date of entry in La Barbe |   |
|---------------------------|---|
| 2013                      | 1 |
| 2012                      | 3 |
| 2011                      | 4 |
| 2010                      | 3 |
| 2009                      | 1 |
| 2008                      | 2 |

Corresponding roughly to the time of membership, there is a relatively balanced distribution of participation in meetings.

| Participation in how many meetings |   |
|------------------------------------|---|
| > 21                               | 4 |
| 11 - 20                            | 4 |
| 6 - 10                             | 2 |
| 1 - 5                              | 4 |

The number of public interventions in which they participated varies from 1 (1 answer) to 20 (3 responses), with 5 who have participated in 10 to 20 appearances.

| Participation in how many public interventions |   |
|--|---|
| > 20   | 3 |
| 10 - 20  | 5 |
| 5 - 9  | 3 |
| 2 - 4  | 0 |
| only 1   | 1 |
| no answer                                      | 2 |

Concerning their socio-professional profile, the members of La Barbe are rather from a middle class to upper middle class background and work in education, health and

culture fields. The majority of respondents have had former activist experiences, may it be in feminist organisations or other social and/or political or union commitments. There are also:

- 2 who had no prior activist experience
- 4 who are long-time activists
- 1 respondent did not answer this question

As far as learning from the experience with La Barbe is concerned, there is only one person out of 14 who stated that she feels she has learned nothing from her activism with La Barbe. She explained this by her very important prior experience in community activism using the same types of modes of action than La Barbe.

The remaining 13 respondents were clear that engagement with La Barbe has had a learning effect. The answers mention the acquisition or the consolidation of different types of power according to the declination of empowerment cited above.

The answers to the question on the learning effect have been analysed through the prism of the different powers constituent of empowerment.

According to this typology, 11 of the 13 respondents mentioned the "power within":

- "Self-confidence"
- Assurance
- Self-affirmation, assertion,
- Triggering awareness (in the sense of eye-openers)

The same number of answers accounts for different forms of "power to" in its dimension strongly linked to the "power within". They relate primarily to the interventions in the public space:

- Speaking in public
- "Take up space" in the public sphere, to position oneself
- Know how to defend ones' ideas and rights, know how to motivate others
- Sense of repartee
- Stress management

Some respondents mentioned that such learning had impacts on their professional lives.

Some items in "power to" category concern more technical skills:

- Communication, relations with media, use of social networks
- Logistics

Various other elements may also be classified as "power to":

- Awareness about gender equality powered by enhanced knowledge
- Capacity for analysis and structuring of thought and reflection
- Information monitoring
- Vigilance
- Sense of realism

The contributions in terms of "power with" are also very important :

- Experience of collective modes of action
- Co-construction,
- Solidarity, sorority

## - Information flow

In connection with the "power over", there were references to learning in terms of contestation of dominating power (quotations) :

- Interrupting elder men
- Resisting law enforcement officers ,
- Taking the right to speak despite the fact that it is not authorised ,
- Continuing to read a leaflet despite hostile reactions

Empowerment was also once mentioned as such.

## Conclusion, limits and perspectives

To conclude the presentation of the first results, we can confirm that activism in La Barbe can be considered as a form of informal learning, as the vast majority of respondents clearly perceive a significant effect in terms of learning. This learning is informal in the sense that it is not the objective of La Barbe and there is no specifically or explicitly educative action. As noted by the respondent who was among the founders, the impact in terms of learning depends largely on the "starting point" of the person who joins La Barbe.<sup>30</sup>

It is thanks to the individual's commitment, through and in favour of the collective capacity, that learning occurs. Besides the public intervention as such, informal learning is taking place in the group, through the expression of opinions and preferences, through participation in collective decision-making and through the collective execution of organisational or communicational tasks. This leads to the development of critical thinking through action, a form of "reinterpretation through action" which refers to intelligent learning because it is accompanied by reflection.<sup>31</sup>

The limitations of this research are mainly linked to the time factor: many responses arrived late and the individual interviews could not be carried out before completing the present paper, which is an intermediate conclusion. Another weak point is the absence of a comparative perspective (comparison with activism in other feminist organisations - "classic" feminist associations, but also Femen, etc. - and other modes of actions - demonstrations, petitions, artistic performances, etc.).

Several points need to be looked at in depth during the next stage, such as continuing the analysis of the specific use of humour and irony, or addressing the importance of the non-mixed setting, which are necessary in order to investigate if these elements have an effect on the learning process that accompanies activism in La Barbe. The further investigations will also allow to deepen our understanding of the nature of the informal learning (e.g. the existence or not of a threshold effect in the learning process, etc.), to identify more precisely the sources of informal learning and to understand if the concerned women can "reinvest" their increased powers elsewhere in the public and private sphere.

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<sup>30</sup> The answer of the one person who said they did not learn can be interpreted in the same way.

<sup>31</sup> MEZIRROW, Jack, (2001), p. 121

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