

## **Social networks approaches to activism and cultural practices of young people**

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Political participation depends heavily on the existence of social networks. Many recent works insist on the importance of personal relationships in the nature, duration and orientation of activism in political parties and trade unions (Diani and McAdam 2003). Personal networks play a crucial role in recent transformations of political engagement where individualization, multi-engagement and specialisation characterize the rise of a network culture (see Lance Bennett's contribution in this volume), which is prominent in the youth political culture in the alter-global movement. In this paper we carry out a comparison between two different analyses of the articulation between on the one hand, social networks and cultural practices, and on the other hand, between social networks and political involvement. Our premise is that on a methodological level, political activities can be considered as a cultural practice and observed with the same descriptive tools. We raise this question in juxtaposing the results of two different research projects that we've conducted in collaboration in recent years. One is dealing with cultural and leisure practices and the other with political involvement; both use the methodology of personal networks to represent social relationships among small groups of young people.

The objective of the first study is to build methodological tools for the description and interpretation of the relations between three types of activities that are often studied in an isolated way: the practices of communication, the personal network of contacts, and cultural and leisure activities (Cardon and Granjon 2003). In this perspective we've conducted a qualitative study of the social networks of 20 young French students. A typology of three configurations linking social networks and cultural practices has been built in order to analyse the different uses of communication tools. The second study tries to analyse the place and the role of new technologies of communication in the building of the alter-global movement. In this perspective we pay a specific attention to new forms of political involvement and to the role of new technologies in transnational activists networks (Aguiton and Cardon 2004). We've conducted network analysis of the relationship of a small group of ten young activists by using the same methodological protocol of personal networks.

Though these two different research projects had no direct connection, their juxtaposition highlights many aspects of the transformation of youth political culture. In order to set up this comparison, we treat civic activism as a cultural practice. Recent transformations of young civic involvement towards what we call "network culture" also suggest that we can compare the rise of this new organizational form among activists and the tools that have been built by social sciences in social network theory. In this way, we attempt a different approach to the main features that many observers have depicted as characteristic of "network political culture": the interaction of personal

and political dimensions, the belonging to many different organizations, the critique of delegation processes, the consumption of traditional and alternative media, and the use of internet. We suggest that one consequence of the intensive use of internet in youth political groups is to intensify the articulation between friendship and political activities, a link that has characterized many student mobilisations in the past.

## **Cultural practices and social networks**

What connection can be established between the cultural and political practices of young people and their systems of relationships? By applying certain methodologies of the sociology of social networks to the sociology of cultural practices, we construct descriptive tools enabling us to explore the relational dimension of cultural and recreational activities.

### **The personal network methodology**

Individuals' cultural and recreational activities can be seen as a tool for investigating their networks of relationships (Lavenu 2002). Many social relations are constructed, in different ways, around cultural and recreational activities (without necessarily being limited to them). The reasons are multiple: these activities are often performed in a group, they provide subject matter for conversations, they are the object of common tastes, and, finally, relevant objects are exchanged (books, magazines, CDs, audio or video tapes, etc.). We therefore chose, in an ethnographic spirit, to apply the methodology of personal networks developed by the network analysis approach. In this methodology (Gribaudo 1998; Eve 2002) the respondents were first asked to keep a record of all the individuals they contacted and all their media-related, cultural, recreational and communication practices over a period of two weeks. These data, recorded in a notebook, enabled us to identify regular or occasional relations as well as their context of activation. They also allowed us to make an inventory of daily cultural and political practices. We then constructed a matrix of relations between people who know one another. The analysis of the different information provided by the notebooks and the matrix then served as a basis for long biographical interviews that enabled us to articulate the respondents' cultural profiles to their relationship patterns.

This data production method does not enable us to work on large corpuses or representative samples. Since our aim was to obtain individual portraits with cultural profiles characterized by a *screen culture* (Jouët & Pasquier, 1999) – in this case, computers – we opted for a qualitative sample based on a particular social group with seemingly rich and varied combinations of forms of sociability and cultural engagement: ten young people of both sexes, in the 19-24 age-group, with extensive use of computers with internet access (at home, at their parents' home, at university, etc.), use of various functions of mobile telephony, and attendance of higher education institutions. Since the distribution of cultural practices and social networks corresponds, cumulatively, to an individual's cultural capital (Héran, 1988), the weight of the cultural

capital inherited from their social background and acquired from higher education institutions makes this group particularly well-suited for this type of research.

The 19-24 age-group corresponds to a life period in which experimentation tends to be more extensive than in earlier life phases (Galland, 1995; Dubet, 1996). It is thus a key period in the construction of personal networks. During these years a more elective and interpersonal logic in 'choices' of relationships gradually replaces a contextualized logic centred on shared places and activities (Bidart, 1997), and relationships tend to be linked to cultural and recreational practices. The cultural orientations of this group are characterized by a decrease in the consumption of 'established culture' and more consumption of information, along with a greater variety of activities (Mendras, 1988). Students show more broad-mindedness as they shift their focus from a single 'genre' characteristic of adolescence, to an eclecticism accompanied by the 'discovery' of formerly less popular genres (Patureau, 1992; Donnat, 1994). This student eclecticism can be seen, for instance, in the typical repertoire of outings, situated precisely at the intersection of characteristically juvenile practices (cinema, discos, bars, sports events), more cultural activities (theatre, opera, museums, exhibitions) and essentially family-oriented activities (walks, fun fairs, etc.) (Lahire 2004; Jouët & Pasquier 1999).

### **Three types of relation between sociability and cultural/political practices : specialization, distribution, polarization**

We applied a descriptive tool to our sample in order to identify the person's individual ways of configuring certain segments of their network of relations, based on their cultural practices. Three different situations were identified, in which: (i) a specific type of cultural practice is reserved (quasi)-exclusively for a type of relational network (*specialization*); (ii) a type of cultural practice is shared with several circles of the person's relational network (*distribution*); and (iii) several types of cultural practice involve the same relational network (*polarization*). In order to illustrate this typology, we will now consider the portrait of three of our respondents corresponding to these three types of configuration. In our approach the production of relational mapping was designed as a continuation via interviews with the respondents. During the last interview we showed them their respective relational maps and asked them to identify the different circles of relations and to describe each of these groups. The clarifications offered in the interviews highlighted the three types of sociability and practices. (Maillochon 1998).

### **Polarization of the Goulven clan and free parties "galaxy"**

We illustrate the method with Goulven, 24, is a part-time student in a technical university in Rennes where he is taking a degree in socio-cultural leadership. He also has a subsidized job as an assistant educator. Goulven's father is from a working-class background while his mother is from the lower middle-classes. Goulven has a passion for music and his taste has developed and broadened with time. His network of contacts has also evolved considerably in recent years. Schematically it is represented by concentric groups of contacts. Like Russian dolls, his groups of friends fits into larger

networks of relations related to music and so-called free parties (open social gatherings).

Goulven lives in an independent flat in his father's home with his brother Serge whose friends are present more or less permanently. Goulven's immediate gang, or *clan*, is thus comprised of his 21-year-old brother, who had repeatedly failed at school and two of his friends, Julien and Lolo, both doing a course in horticulture. They more or less live together in the flat and spent their evenings smoking, playing video games, listening to music and watching TV. On week-ends the clan often goes to concerts, especially to listen to reggae and rap a club where Goulven occasionally works as a DJ. The parties he goes to and the people he meets have gradually changed the clan's taste in music from reggae and rap to techno. This change in their centre of interest has prompted them to go out and move about far more, looking for free parties. Every week-end he and the clan frequented the larger collectives, or *galaxies*, of those offering free parties. In this context he met Anthony and Stéphan, from Lorient, who opened a door for him. They were to act as gateways to Goulven's deeper involvement in the techno community, where he sees himself as a future organizer of events.

#### *Goulven's relational dynamics*

Co-presence is a crucial feature in the *polarization* dynamic. This dynamic can be defined as a tendency to focus on a set of distinct cultural practices that are shared within a clan. The clan, a close-knit core that initially thrives on gregarious togetherness, nevertheless remains open and also participates in larger galaxies. (Bidart, 1997). Thus, Goulven and the members of the clan with whom he practices multiple 'internal' activities (music, videogames, TV, the growing and use of cannabis, etc.), are also engaged in 'external' activities such as concerts and free parties. These external activities lead them to broaden their small circle to other people that they then contact occasionally by phone and meet personally at concerts and parties. The youth culture galaxies, that often revolve around public places in which people can meet without making appointments (e.g., bars and night-clubs), have found particularly fertile ground for their deployment in the development of urban cultures and, more specifically, in the so-called free parties movement (Racine, 2002), a form of open-house socialising. Hence, the expansion of practices in the *polarization* dynamic is collective rather than individual. It is the clan as a whole that socialises, accumulates knowledge and develops competencies. In the case of Goulven's group, the expansion of the clan's interest in free parties will lead them together to become the organizers of techno events and activists for the free parties' movement.

#### **The distribution of Nina's festive sociability**

Nina is a 23-year-old master's student at Rennes University and lives alone in a small flat in the city. She is from an upper-class family and spent her childhood in Nantes (a big urban centre in the west of France) and at the family's holiday home in La Baule (an holiday town close to Nantes). Nina is an assiduous student, loves TV and internet, is

sporty and enjoys having fun with her friends. The degree of interconnection between different groups of relations is very high in her case; she has dense networks. Characteristically, her family network is not isolated from her friendships. At the time of the survey Nina had maintained regular contact with all the people with whom she had formed relationships throughout her life. This high level of interrelations between the different segments of her network is characteristic of the social ease with which Nina has established contact between these different groups of friends (especially by attending parties). She has gradually overlapped and shifted her different circles of relations without ever creating a sudden break. This has enabled her to maintain bonds with different circles of friends while progressively transforming the modalities and forms of contact with them.

### *Nina's relational dynamics*

With the *distribution* dynamic, there is a strong tendency to shift a cultural or recreational activity to other circles, leading to connection and inter-relations between the different circles. This is the case of Nina, who distributes her taste for outings, parties and television among all her groups of friends, irrespective of the origin of the group (family, holidays, student life, brothers' network, etc.). In fact Nina's activities are not instrumental in the creation of new relations. They neither change nor impact significantly on the forms of relationship between members of the different circles, which are often multiple. Nina conceives of her different groups of relations as 'private clubs' among which she distributes her tastes for 'parties' and TV, while specifying particular ways of *doing things* with each of them (drinking parties, dance parties, more intimate parties; TV series, DVD, general-interest programmes).

When, due to geographic distance (among other criteria), the members of these various circles are unable to attend the same festive events, Nina tries to share the atmosphere of the parties held with certain individuals (e.g. her mother and her best friend). She allows them access to the dedicated website that she manages, centralizing the photos, videos and various multimedia objects constituting the visual memory of that particular circle. The wish to share experiences, emotions and points of view with people who did not participate in the activities can also be seen in regular conversations on 'My parties with the others' and 'What I watched on TV'. In this respect it is striking to note a particularly marked use of the telephone (in Nina's case, mobile: voice and text) to discuss past and future parties or TV programmes with best friends. The distribution of activities in a highly multiplexed network corresponds to a form of social capital that corresponds with the social skills usually found among the middle and especially the upper classes.

### **Nathan's specialized virtual relations**

Nathan is from Arcachon. His mother is a teacher and his father is retired from the air force. Apart from the family network that plays a minor part in the construction of Nathan's 'new social world', the actors of his relational network clearly belong to four

poles related to specific territories and individuals. The first pole consists of the other students that he met in the private student residence. The university is the second way in which Nathan met people. The third part of Nathan's network consists of the "virtual" relations that he maintains with various people on the internet. He subscribes to various newsgroups on computing, films, music and video games, and his on-line activities are structured around forums on *mangas*, hacking and video games. He has also created a "pirate" website from which he allows webservers to upload software and files under copyright, free-of-charge.

These electronic relations can be divided into two categories: on the one hand, a majority of individuals with whom he has only electronic contact and, on the other, two people with whom Nathan has developed a closer relationship: Jean-Pierre, a friend with whom he has a lot in common, and Anne, his girl-friend whom he met through chatting and with whom he maintains different forms of communication on a daily basis.

Finally, the fourth and last pole in the structure of his sociability is music. Throughout his life music has always been a resource for making (strong or weak) contacts and enhancing his circles of relationships. Thus, his passion for music partly structures his sociability which, in turn, draws on it to grow and develop (e.g. he belongs to a jazz band with David and Jean – his 'best' friends – and to a choir). Nathan's passion for music is distributed differently, depending on the people concerned. With his musician friends he exchanges pieces by unknown specialized musicians found on the internet, whereas to his university friends he gives (or sells) compilations of pop music from throughout the world, also downloaded from the Net.

#### *Nathan's relational dynamics*

Nathan manages his social capital on his own. Rather than trying to interconnect the different social circles he frequents, he keeps potential links to a minimum, as he used to do when he previously lived in New Caledonia. Nathan's social network thus contains few multiple relations. Although some of his friends in a particular group (e.g. his fellow students) know other friends in other circles (e.g. his musician friends), Nathan purposely keeps these different relational spaces separate. For instance, none of the members of his network know his girlfriend, his musician friends have not met his student friends, and his family knows virtually none of the people he has met in Rennes. For all these reasons, his social network can be described as specialized.

The *specialization* dynamic is characterized above all by a strong tendency to select and to separate circles of sociability, each of which is associated with a specific activity. This is the case of Nathan, who has specialized circles of friends: his musician friends and his internet friends, fans of *mangas* and video games. Nathan closely manages his social capital, essentially by creating 'relational niches' over which he exercises tight control. His tastes and activities serve less to unite these different relational worlds in a common space of shared activities than to isolate them. The specialization of his

practices has an increasingly strong selective impact on possible people he meets. Opportunities for contact become rarer as the information, competencies and learning required for the accomplishment of the activity become more specialized. That is probably why frequentation of virtual communities seems far more developed in the specialization dynamic than in the other two. When no interlocutor can be found close by, interaction on the internet is an essential resource for creating communication spaces in specialized areas.

Between the members of the specialised circles a form of '*differentiated*' friendship develops that, as Simmel (1991: 34) put it, 'each time concerns only one aspect of the personality without interfering with the others'. They do not meet in other places and their conversations are oriented by their shared activity. These groups are thus formed in the same way as amateur clubs, fan clubs or communities of conviction (Le Guern 2002). Yet the formal diversification of the link and more personal conversations do sometimes appear as a necessary step in maintaining and enhancing the initial relationship.

### **Social networks and activism**

Especially since the demonstrations in Seattle against the World Trade Organization in 1999, the rise of the alter-global movement has been tremendous. This new form of international activism is characterized by the cooperation of a large diversity of organizations: trade unions, NGOs, social movements, local associations, think tanks, etc. (Keck, Sikkink 1998; Della Porta, Kriesi, Rucht 1999; Riles 2001). This constellation of actors is exemplary of a large-scale network structure organized, from local to international level, by the coordination of thousand of individuals and groups with heterogeneous properties (Florini 2003). Among many others, two dimensions of this new kind of international mobilization must be underlined for our purpose: the uses of internet-based communication tools and the role of young activists in the shaping of the movement.

### **The alter-global movement as a network**

The building of transnational networks of activists demands specific tools for the coordination of collective actions, the circulation of information and the running of multipolar structures. For this reason the networks against neoliberal globalization, called variously the no-global, the anti-global or the alter-globalization movements, have developed an early and decisive use of the internet. Separated geographically and rarely having the opportunity of meeting each other, members of the alter-globalisation movement have incorporated the web into most of their activities (McCaughey and Ayers 2003; Downing 2001). Internet technologies are thus participating in the constitution of a new repertoire of collective action (calls for mobilisation, alert networks, virtual sit-ins, on-line petitions, mail-bombing, etc.). Internet distribution lists also encourage new forms of co-operation and circulation of information. Many observers have been surprised by the intensity of the use of cooperative electronic tools

by transnational activists: on-line cooperative publication, syndication of contents between websites, lists of discussion with procedures of decision-taking, audio and videoconference and the growing use of chat meeting, etc. (Costanza-Chok 2003; Granjon 2001). In a small amount of time, the web has become the principal area of visibility for the thoughts and actions of the alter-global movement. Even if its audience remains limited to a nebula of activists and interested journalists, the coverage on the web of counter-summits (Seattle, Prague, Quebec, Genoa, Porto Alegre, Florence, etc.) is radically different from that of traditional mass media. Even though the distinction is somewhat artificial, it is not difficult to remark that this alternative production of online information is more documented, better illustrated, more controversial and far more focused on globalisation issues than that produced by the professional press (Cardon and Granjon 2002).

Internet appears not only as a useful tool but also as a technical infrastructure that shares the same organizational form with this new web of activists. Internet has increased the opportunity to connect actors distributed among the world; it helps to promote alternative media opened to the participation of the public; it offers specific resources to share information during an international campaign; it gives the possibility of forming global networks that bypass central authority and further, especially significant for resource-poor organizations, etc. Castells (2001) suggests that we can compare the form of international activism with the structure of the World Wide Web. The organization of World Social Forum in Porto Alegre is exemplary of a network mobilization of international social movements (Sen, Anand, Escobar, Waterman, 2004). The way they are organized presents clear differences in comparison to former techniques of mobilisation used by social movements.

First, the World Social Forum is an open-space with no strong criteria to select its participants. One of the main political goals of its promoters is to preserve the diversity of its participants and to remain open to newcomers. Left-wing Marxist organizations, Christian associations, academics, professional NGOs, etc., are linked together in the forum coordination structure. Therefore, we can understand why a network-based organization has been chosen as the best solution to organize diversity without promoting a central leadership. The network appears as much as a technical configuration having its own geometry as a political imperative establishing a particular discipline for the actors who participate in it (Boltanski and Chiapello 1999).

Secondly, there are no real political discussions between the leading figures of the forum in order to shape a political platform or to draw a strategic agenda. Nobody can speak on behalf of the forum. The Forum's Charter of Principles strongly opposes the assignment of any kind of direction or leadership inside it. The building of the forum is mainly procedural and its main objective is to give the opportunity to various actors to create contacts, debates and local coordination on specific issues. Instead of hierarchical mass organizations led by delegates, new social movements are built by the coordination of small collectives who refuse delegation process, specialize their objective and prefer direct and symbolic action to representative politics. Even though there is a strong heterogeneity inside the alter-globalisation movement, central actors



and leading figures are representative of this new form of activism: more flexible, more individualistic and more oriented towards international struggles. Among the different generation of activists in the alter-global movement, youth activism is certainly the most characteristic actor of this new frame of mobilization.

### **Young activists in the alter- global movement**

Since demonstrations in Seattle in December 1999, young activists have played an important role in the alter-global movement. Even though youth activism is not the main feature of the rise of these new forms of mobilization, young people nonetheless figure prominently in the organizations (environmentalists, alternative media, homeless and unemployment organisations, etc.) and are very active in street demonstrations. They've also developed original and visible techniques of mobilization that are very attractive for the media (zap, haktivism, army of clowns, etc.). In a quantitative survey dealing with the identity of participants to the European Social Forum (ESF) in November 2003, Agrikoliansky and Sommier (2005) showed that 28 percent of the participants were less than 25 years old and 22 percent were between 25 and 35 years old. During demonstrations against the meeting of the G8 in Evian in June 2003, there was also a very high proportion of young activities among participants, and in Annemasse during the G8 protest, ten thousands of young activists gathered from all over Europe to experiment self-organized way of living in two large youth camps.

The involvement of young activists in the alter-globalisation movement has a few specific characteristics. Some youth organizations are linked to NGO's such as the student's group from ATTAC; others belong to political parties and trade unions. But young citizens are often attracted by new forms of involvement and refuse the vertical and hierarchical structure of traditional political parties or large NGO's. The most active elements of young activists in the alter-globalisation movement create new forms of collectives that are more closely linked to the main concern of the international struggle against neoliberalism, such as associations of unemployed, homeless, and immigrant people, as well as developmental and environmentalists associations. They prefer to use the term "collective" or "network" than to be identified as a traditional organization.

In Europe, new collectives of activists of this sort appeared at the end of the nineties, such as Reclaim the Street, Aarrg! (Apprentis Agitateurs pour un réseau de Résistances Globales), VAMOS, MRG (Movimiento de Resistencia Global), etc. (Bircham and Charlton 2001). Without regard to their ideological differences, such organizations gather and coordinate individuals belonging to different collectives. For example, the Network of Global Resistance is an international coordination of youth movements linking German, Argentine, Brazilian, Canadian, Chilean, Spanish, French, Indian, Italian and Portuguese individuals and organizations. They meet during World Social Forums and have a close electronic coordination (Datchary and Pagis, 2005). In France, the "Intergalactic network" is a constellation of very different youth organisations (Catholic, Marxist, anarchist, ecologist, etc.) that prepares specific events during the different social forums. Individual commitments play a more important role than organizational belongings.

The individualization of political involvement appears clearly in youth organizations of the alter-globalisation movement. This feature is linked to the sociological profiles of participants. Most of them are highly educated and are students in the best universities. It explains their abilities to communicate, to write texts, messages and manifestos. Their use of internet is highly intensive. However, it seems that only few of the activists, the most committed, actually produce some kind of formal texts on the internet.

### **Sociability and political involvement**

If both social networks and political participation are closely linked to the distribution of cultural capital among individuals, social networks play nevertheless a crucial role in the process of individual participation in social movements (Diani and McAdam 2003). As we noted above, McAdam and Paulsen (1993) have shown that organisational links are a strong predictable variable of political involvement. Networks have multiple functions and intervene at different moments in the process of individual participation. A social network approach offers new perspectives in the understanding of the sensitivity of actors for different public issues, the dynamic of their involvement, its intensity and its duration. The social networks in which actors interact convey meanings (e. g. symbols, rituals, narratives) that build and solidify identities and shape the actors' cognitive frames, thereby enabling them to interpret social reality and to define a set of actions that involve them in this perceived reality (Passy 2003). Researches have shown that the duration of the involvement depends on the density of the links that have been woven inside the organization (Snow et al. 1996). It has also been shown that, in the case of young people's commitments to civic organizations, a strong link associates friendship and activism. Civic, environmentalist and feminist student mobilizations have always created friendship cliques built on deliberative democracy.

This model of political cooperation and radical equalities, which characterized the youth political participation since the sixties, has often also been criticized for its closeness and its exclusivity:

When a movement old guard is made up of friends, its effort to incorporate newcomers may be compromised by the subtle ways in which members reaffirm their bonds with each other, inadvertently excluding newcomers. In addition, friends tend to choose friends who are like them, in terms of both their values and beliefs and their demographic characteristics. They probably do this both to minimize their own discomfort with difference and to avoid threatening the existing network of friends. [...] Another danger: if friends are generally likely to agree on major issues, profound disagreements may be experienced as emotional betrayal. (Poletta 2002: 154).

The paradox of friendship has often been seen as a threat for the destiny of young political groups and a reason why many of them have failed or have transformed themselves into hierarchical and professional organizations. The hypothesis that we want to explore here is that a change has occurred in the manner young activists view

friendship in new social movement. With a more individualistic perspective, partly imported from behaviours in consumption and leisure activities, friendship seems to be more differentiated and opportunistic.

Although this interpretation is submitted to a lot of criticism (Collovald, et al., 2002), different studies indicate that changes in the relationship between sociability and political participation to parties and trade unions have occurred over the last fifteen years (e.g., Ion 1997). The links between familial political orientations and political participation have loosened their importance. To the same extent, the close connection between socio-professional inscription and political participation has not the same importance as in the past. Many other factors have played a role in this shift: the loosening power of political and unionist organizations, the fragmentation of protest in many specialized and partly contradictory issues and the disappearance of integrating ideological mainframes. Activists' social networks are not so imbedded in familial and professional networks as they used to be in regard to the building of left-wing party participation. New forms of participation, mainly in NGO and new social movements, show a relative de-connexion between these spheres of social relations.

Nevertheless, this transformation appears to be more complex than a simple shift from a strong determination of political participation by familial and professional relationships to an individual choice conducted with elective friends. We want to suggest that the different configurations of social networks also determine, and are shaped by, the type of involvement in different social movements. In short, we hypothesize that the network-like forms of the protests appear as an opportunity structure of relational bonds that fits well with the transformations of sociability. New opportunities for participation offered to young people by the network structure of the alter-globalisation movement and the uses of communication tools in order to extend and strengthen their social networks are two determinant features of the reorganisation of activist sociability that we must consider together. The development of web-based relationships enhances the emergence of weak ties in individual's network and accordingly affords multiple, short-term and overlapping coordinations.

We want to explore this hypothesis by looking at three cases extracted from a study using quite the same network methodology we introduced above in regard to networks of culture and leisure. Judith, Louis and Alexia belong to organizations or collectives representative of the new social movements that appeared in France during the 90's in opposition to traditional parties, trade unions and hierarchical NGOs and who see themselves as part of the alter-globalisation movement. Even if the methodological protocol of this survey is slightly different, we've still basically designed their personal network of relations on the basis of the contacts (face-to-face, phone, email) they recorded during 15 days. In this study, the focus on cultural practices has been replaced by an exploration of civic involvements and political practices. But, as we will see, we can use the same formal typology of configurations of social networks to understand the distribution of civic activities among their repertoire of social contacts.

The first characteristic of this sample of activists is the intensity of their sociability. Unlike classical observations of the decline in the number of social contacts with age (Bidart, Péliissier 2002), we observed that the number of contacts is increasing with age within this very specific population. In the sample of activists, interviewees are older (from 20 to 29 years old) than in the young students' sample, but significantly, they appear to have a larger network of relationships. A second characteristic is the active role of new tools of communication in the management of this large amount of social relationships. All interviewees are active users of email and discussion lists. They spend a lot of time coordinating activities with electronic tools. On-line and off-line contacts are closely articulated in the organisation of their daily activities, mainly because on-line coordination is an instrument to organise face-to-face meetings or demonstrations. Civic involvement increases social capital by raising the number of weak ties and the ability to reach very distant contacts in order to coordinate them.

### **Judith, in a polarized network**

Judith is 26 years old. Her father is professor at the university and her mother teaches in school. They are not committed to any political parties (her mother is a member of a trade union), but discussions with left-wing political concerns have always been strong in the family. Judith discovered civic participation in high school when she took part in antiracist mobilizations. After her studies at the university, she spent one year in Italy with her sister where she occasionally had a few activities in Rome's Social Centre. When she came back to France to become a young teacher, one of her friend brought her to the occupation of a church in Paris led by a collective supporting illegal immigrants. Even though Judith had no particular interest in this issue and had no specific knowledge about Chinese immigrants' situation, she discovered a new political experience and decided to commit herself passionately to this mobilisation.

Within a few months, she participated in three different collectives: Cargo (a small affinity group who demand a universal minimum income), a collective of Chinese' illegal immigrants and to AC! (Action contre le chômage; a collective of unemployed workers). Judith also had a lot of contacts with Act-Up and the trade-union, Sud. During two years, she jumped from one mobilization to another. She helped illegal immigrants to produce files in order to get official papers, she participated in many occupations of buildings in Paris with homeless people, she was strongly active in unemployed's struggle against the reform of unemployment allocation, and she took part in multiple zaps organized by Act-up against pharmaceutical companies. Belonging to multiple activist groups is one feature of new social movements that has appeared since the middle of the nineties in France. Judith illustrates this flexible structure of interlinked relationships well. She doesn't create any kind of separation between all her spheres of engagement. Everybody knows everyone. And she has multiplex relationships with everyone. Friends and activists are linked to one another and for Judith, it can't be otherwise. Her boyfriend is also an activist and Judith doesn't have many relationships outside this large circle of friend-activists. "Affinity groups" are essentials in Judith' civic experiences.

### **Louis, in a specialized network**

Unlike Judith, the structure of Louis' network is clearly specialized. Louis is unemployed and belongs to different collectives. He has joined an association of unemployed people (MNCP, "Mouvement national des chômeurs et des précaires") and had some participation in a small group of young anarchists. But his main involvement is in technology for activism. He belongs to RAS, an association that provides internet services for actors of social mobilizations (web sites, email lists, etc.). He spends a lot of time giving technical advice to other activist structures, and he moderates some discussion lists. In his network, Louis clearly establishes a separation between activists and friends. Only a few activists are both declared 'activist and friend. His 'true' friends are constituted by another group of people who have no connection with his activist world. They share another passion, archaeology, and have different opportunities to meet each other and to discuss and practice archaeology.

### **Alexia, in a distributed network**

Alexia's distributed social network keeps the memory of the different stages of her life. Her parents are employees and communist activists in a small town in Brittany. During her studies in high school in Rennes, she was strongly connected with a closed group of activists belonging to the youth communist party organization (JC : 'Jeunesses communistes'). The 16-19 years period was a very intense period of Alexia's life. Friendship, political, sexual and cultural activities were closely shared in this small community of young activists. This polarized clan is still a group of reference for her, even if nearly all of them have stopped their political involvement in the communist party. Alexia has named them "friends". She always has a lot of face-to-face and phone contacts with them. After the "polarized" period of her student life in Rennes, she went to university in Paris where she participated in a communist party section and worked as assistant in regional public administration for communist party. But she began to distribute her social relationships in different circles. Activist comrades and professional relations are not linked together and Alexia constitutes different circles of relations even if political concerns are shared by all of them. She is involved in different struggles and creates special relationships for each of them. This network structure appears more traditional than the two others. Alexia has built a clear division of the role and function of her different circles of friends and comrades.

### **A few comparative hypotheses**

The comparison between the six networks of Nathan/Louis (*specialized*), Nina/Alexia (*distributed*) and Goulven/Judith (*polarized*) enables us to identify a few attributes for each of these networks dynamics in the organization of sociability and activism. These categories must nevertheless be understood as configurational dynamics representing

trends in the different ways that individuals share their cultural practices or civic activities with their circles of friends. Accordingly, these dynamics should not be seen as too intentional. They are essentially the unintended result of an accumulation of minor acts, choices and refusals, inclinations and repulsions that make sense only in the overall result produced by the notebook methodology. Nor should the individuals concerned be confined to a single configuration.

These relationships between civic involvements, cultural practices and the organization of networks of sociability in the 19-24 age-group highlight several types of phenomena. First, in order to identify the multiple figures of political participation, it is necessary to consider the full spectrum of an individual's relations. In some cases individuals limit an active involvement in a particular circle and distribute more ordinary civic practices to other segments of their relational network. Second, these modes of cultural/political organization of sociability also have to be understood in a dynamic perspective. Since they correspond to specific moments in any individuals' relational trajectories, they necessarily evolve with time, as those individuals' representations and relationships are renewed. These categories define the characteristics of individuals and their social milieu, and specific times in their life cycles.

We can also posit that the *polarization* dynamic corresponds to a phase closer to the experiences of high-school pupils and to the "total" involvement in affinity groups, while the *distribution* dynamic corresponds to entangled sequences of student life and the succession of short-term involvements. Finally, the *specialization* dynamic marks an individualization of practices necessitated by the time constraints of family and working life. It fits particularly well with the rising of expert engagement in new forms of social protest. This temporal organization obviously varies from one individual to another. This dynamic transformation can also be observed in the transformation of youth political commitments. After the 'affinity' group period, they tend both to specialize and distribute their political networks. However, this argument suggests that it would be useful to develop a longitudinal and dynamic approach to transformations of individuals' systems of relationships, in relation to changes in their political practices – something that calls for further study.

However, we want to conclude with a more hypothetical interpretation of possible transformations of the youth activist culture. Briefly, it seems that the risk of exclusivity of young polarized activists networks are counterbalanced by network articulations offered by the shape of new social movements. The coordination of multiple issues, the intertwining building of public campaign, and the changing distribution of multiple belongings reclaim circulation and openness. Even if this 'network culture' is quite only reserved to upper and middle class students, it is becoming a major concern inside political groups involved in alter-globalisation movements. Further, and importantly, we suggest that new communication tools have an important role in this dynamic. Mobility and specialization are the two main characteristics of network activism. And, as our examples suggest it, mobile phone and communication with internet are key instruments for distributed and specialized social networks. Democratic behaviour is not an organizational objective but an imperative for the management of network structures.

Transparency is not only claimed inside the organization, as in student mobilization of the sixties, but also outside and between organizations. Significantly, a lot of youth organizations have decided to give access to their internal discussion to outsiders. Meeting reports are accessible on their websites, discussion list archives can be read by everyone, and activists are very sensitive on the issue of their openness to outsiders.

Comparing the internal life of Direct Action Network (DAN), a group of young American activists who played a leading role in the demonstration of Seattle, and former feminist and civic American organisations Francesca Poletta, show that the role of friendship has changed in the building of internal democracy. In the new forms of protest, the multiplication of the bonds, the necessity of multipolar coordination of collective action between people who have sometimes nothing in common but the issue of the mobilization, and the imperative of transparency as a condition of democratic behaviours, all tend to distribute even the more polarized affinity groups. Even if trust, intimacy and proximity are always strong values in affinity groups, new models of commitment emphasize individual circulation to join one issue after another. Like the variety of multiple and short-term commitments in single-issue mobilizations, kinship is becoming more spotty if not less intense, less exclusive and less attentive to ideological differences. In a network context, we can hypothesize that, in the Simmel's words (1991), 'undifferentiated' friendship is becoming more 'differentiated'.

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