

## ORDINARY CITIZENS' POLITICAL COMPETENCE

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**Abstract:** *In spite of the observable abundance of demonstrations, marches, occupations, civil disobedience, creation of "movement parties", associative commitments, online petitions, non-violent direct action, mobilization via social networks, these citizens' "autonomous political practices" are still seen as useless on the grounds that they lie at the margins of the framework set by representative institutions. These practices should be apprehended in a different way. This article aims at substantiating the fact that the current political order is shaped by the confrontation between two equal sources of legitimacy: that which emanates from the official institutions of representative government and essentially relies on election and delegation; and that which arises from the "wild" activism people get involved in to oppose discredited authorities and sometimes succeed in regaining control over the powers who define and implement public policies.*

**Key words:** *protest movements; political legitimacy; ordinary conception of politics; citizens' autonomous political practices; political competence.*

Civil uprising in Algeria prompting the resignation of a former President; high school pupils striking for climate change in Europe; endless Yellow Vests protest in France; election as President of Zuzana Caputova in Slovakia and of Volodymyr Zelenski in Ukraine; demonstrations against corruption in Romania and Bulgaria; mass rallies in Khartoum eventually leading to the ousting of Omar-el-Bechir; etc. The mere mention of this short selection of events which occurred in 2019 between the months of March and May hints at a change steadily taking place in the political realm: citizens express their will to directly challenge those who govern in order to impose by themselves a new direction on the way public affairs are handled. The strength of this resolve is evidenced whenever crowds take to the streets to oppose discredited powers (sometimes successfully expelling them peacefully); whenever NGOs, collectives or associations force governments to negotiate new rights or reverse measures deemed unacceptable; whenever people use civil disobedience, direct non-violent action or occupations to advance their claims; whenever political "movements" emerging outside the party system compete in elections to win seats in parliament and claim participation in an executive; or whenever novices in politics are elected at the head of a state and defeat the candidates of the establishment.

In spite of their undeniable successes, these displays of “wild” activism are still seen by commentators and analysts as devoid of any political value on the grounds that they lie at the margins of the framework set by representative institutions. And when they are tagged as “populists”, they are presented as a danger to the stability of society or to democracy (Ogien & Laugier, 2017). These judgments betray the fears of those who think that responsibility for public affairs must be entrusted to professionals who know how to effectively manage them. Taking such a stance fosters the common belief that ruling a country should not be remitted to ordinary people since they lack the necessary skills in state administration, are unable to grasp the complexities of the common good and ignore the issues at stake in politics.

Yet this disparaging belief is at odds with the fact that citizens strikingly demonstrate their ability to organize themselves and collectively implement forms of political action that cogently challenge decisions and non decisions taken by those who govern (Bachrach & Baratz, 1970) at the local, regional, national, transnational or global level. Acknowledging the extensiveness of this fact should otherwise allow to contend that the current political situation of democracy is defined by the coexistence of two sources of legitimacy : that which emanates from the official institutions of representative government and essentially relies on election and delegation; and that which arises from what may be called the citizens’ “autonomous political practices” - autonomous in the sense of detached from any tie with official organizations like parties or unions and showing no interest in conquering state power. The emergence and development of such practices give more credence to a proposition: ordinary citizens are socially endowed with a full political competence and their conception of politics and democracy are in the main correctly informed and morally grounded (Ogien & Laugier, 2014). This is the claim I would like to substantiate in this article.

### **1. The citizen’s political competence**

Since its foundation in Athens, the very possibility of democracy has always been objected to since such a political regime was doomed to be undermined by demagogy, interest coalitions, oligarchic proclivities, pervasive instability or indecision (Ismard, 2015). In modern times, democracy is contested for other reasons: the professionalization of the electoral process (resorting to *evidence proved politics*) which eventually deprives the “sovereign people” of their power of control over those they choose to govern ; the experience of the ballot which finally shows that voting never brings about a substantial change in the dominant order; the advent of a destructive egalitarianism which ruins all sense of hierarchy and merit (Schnapper, 2014) and propagates the mistaken idea that citizens are allowed to claim an inalienable right to “have rights” (Arendt, 1982).

Giving an ultimate ruling on the true nature of democracy seems to be an hopeless pursuit (Muller, 2011; Dupuis Déri, 2016). One should better consider that the sheer idea of democracy has introduced in the public space an irreducible tension between the promises of equality it encompasses and an equivocal apprehension of the social effects this promise nourishes and would produce if achieved. This tension, which is probably doomed to never be fully wiped out, inheres in the famous maxim: the government of the people by the people for the people (Hébert, 2018). For, since time immemorial, there has been a debate about what is this “people” in whose name a government rules; about how to meet all the legitimate needs of the members of a society without doing harm to anyone ; and about who should be allowed to govern : the people or an expert executive? The way in which these issues have been provisionally resolved two centuries ago is by establishing a system of representative government which mandates a small number of persons endowed with the legitimacy conferred on them by suffrage to decide on matters related to the common good (Manin, 1995). It is this model which is now being challenged or presented as completely obsolete, while the very principle of representation is sometimes harshly questioned (van Reybrouck, 2014).

Antagonism between rulers and governed is and has always been an endemic feature of the political life of state societies (Breugh, 2008). But the widening gap between these two protagonists has taken on abyssal proportions in the public space of post-World War II democratic regimes as people have suffered the devastating effects that austerity policies have had on their lives. There is no longer any doubt that the liberal potion administered to the State has led to an extravagant increase in inequalities, the suppression of social and political rights acquired during the era of the welfare State, the growth of mass unemployment and precariousness, the deterioration of working conditions, the aggravation of corruption, the enforcement of competition as a principle of social regulation (Suleiman, 2005). And as these detrimental features have seldom been mitigated by changes in power following an election, the conviction that politics has become the preserve of a limited circle of right or left wing professionals who all concur with excluding citizens from deliberation and decision-making has become common sense (Katz et Mair, 2009).

Under these conditions, no wonder that elections have lost much of their legitimacy and that the consent of the governed has stopped to be blindly granted to those who have won the polls. In some amazing cases, trust in a newly elected power has been disavowed a couple of weeks only after the vote. Such a staggering ingratitude on the part of the “sovereign people”

– as expressed by the majority of the electorate – has been presented as proof of ordinary citizens’ infantilism or irrationality. Why not see it as a manifestation of their will to put in practice their right of control over the undertakings of the government and the administration ?

Now, for many commentators, allowing citizens to exert such a thorough vigilance on those in power is excessive and unbearable. They contend it should be

denied in order to “let a government govern”. Others see people’s mistrust of their representatives as a sign of deadlock, pathology, fatigue or “crisis” of democracy. And some are prone to contend that a large number of constituents are “bad” citizens who refuse to honour their duty out of unawareness or lack of education. This argument begs a question though: does something as a bad citizen exist? This is the issue this article intends to discuss by calling into question the idea that what academics call “political socialization” brings about obedience to the law, adequately fulfilling the rights and duties attached to citizenship or consciously casting votes to elect representatives. Yet as compliance to these norms of citizenship do not systematically prevail, one should wonder whether or not an individual gets a democratic frame of mind through education only?

Though citizenship is a status individuals are endowed with when they are born, what this status implies hereafter is bit by bit and casually discovered in their daily life commitments as citizens. On this account, one may claim that there is a difference between learning what democracy means and entails through being taught at school and fulfilling the obligation to act as a citizen in a democratic regime. Such a difference points to the fact that two modes of getting acquainted with citizenship jointly operate : formal education of the rules of democracy and mastery of the practical knowledge one should demonstrate when accomplishing the rights and duties attached to citizenship in everyday democratic life. Where does the difference between these two ways of knowing what ought to be done lie?

## **2. Knowing as Process**

C. S. Peirce claimed that knowledge is the product of an inquiry triggered by a doubt about an object or a fact and in the course of which the relevance of initial assumptions are continuously tested and verified (Peirce, 1877). As such, knowing refers to a logical and rational process carried out in immediate relation to the satisfaction it brings about – satisfaction in terms of proper completion of an ongoing action. In Peirce’s perspective, knowledge (be it scientific or ordinary) is doomed to be vague and incomplete, always reframed to handle emerging doubts which set new conditions of satisfaction to solve an issue (Chauviré, 1995).

Dewey has extended Peirce’s conception of inquiry applying it to what he called “social inquiry” – i.e. “solving public problems” (Dewey, 1984). According to him, “what is required to direct and conduct a successful social inquiry is a method that develops itself on the basis of reciprocal relations between observable facts and their results”. And he gave a name to this method: democracy. For Dewey, this method is put in practice whenever concerned people join a “community of inquirers” and collectively engage in solving a public problem through following a series of logical steps. Dewey’s model of social inquiry unfolds in three stages : 1) an undeterminate situation is “had” ; 2) a problem is created ; and (3) a solution to the problem is elicited that is mutually seen as satisfying. The entire procedure is carried

out by implementing an experimental form of reasoning, i.e. relevant elements are selected, endowed with specific attributes and ordered for their use in and for action. Then the robustness of the successive outcomes is step by step tested and warranted. Any inquiry therefore obeys its own logic and has two dimensions to which the people involved in its achievement must constantly pay attention : the first one is applying the rules of experimental reasoning ; the second one is ensuring the continuity and fluidity of gestures, words and events that constitute the action in common which results in getting the problem solved - though the fallibility of this transient solution is still admitted (Dewey, 1989).

In Dewey's view, the end result of an inquiry is less important than the process through which it has been reached. Accordingly, Dewey does not reduce democracy to a given type of political regime. Its bedrock is the capacity to make use of "reflective thinking" when being part of a community of inquirers and demonstrating its collective intelligence. In this light, democracy can be seen as a practical knowledge people express when they act as citizens.

Now one of the questions this experimental conception of democracy raises is where the mastery of these procedures does come from? Or, more precisely, what are the respective parts played by education (instructed knowledge about the nature and functioning of a political regime called democracy) and experience (acquired command of acceptable ways to act as a citizen in a specific institutional environment) in the fabric and implementation of such practical knowledge?

### **3. Experience as practical knowledge**

According to Dewey, education's first aim should be endowing children with a command of the rules of reflective thinking. A command that would later allow them to appropriately contribute to the many inquiries they will have to carry out to secure the reproduction of a true democratic order

For Dewey, the conformity of an action to what it should be - its normativity - does not stem from a series of constraints society imposes by force on individuals who would mechanically comply with their prescriptions. In other words, normativity is not conceived of as deterministic, but regulatory: norms are seen as criteria that individuals use to act in a way that is adjusted to a given "end-in-view". These criteria serve as guidelines for inference and action in the course of a practical activity and have two properties: they are integral to the situations in which they are made use of and are rediscovered each time again in the use made of them for the purposes of an ongoing inquiry. However, Dewey rarely goes into the details of the necessary conditions to be fulfilled in order to achieve each step of an inquiry and pays little attention to the epistemic capacities individuals have to master in order to carry out an inquiry together, to foresee the consequences they have to consider and to finally devise a solution to the problem at hand. Similarly, neither does he account for how these criteria are known to the inquirers nor does he explain how and why they are

led to assess their validity when they have to be called into question.

To complement Dewey's dynamic conception of knowing, I would like to ponder on the respective parts played by formal education and lived experience in the fabric and implementation of the practical knowledge an individual has to make use of in order to act as a skilled inquirer. For the sake of our discussion about ordinary citizens' political competence, the problem of where does practical knowledge spring forces to inquire into the ways instructed knowledge about the nature and functioning of democracy as a political regime and the rights and duties attached to citizenship on the one side, and familiarity with the political life as it is practiced in given institutional environments on the other side intermingle to constitute a sound basis of intelligibility of what is going on

A rough description of the constitution of practical knowledge would distinguish four layers which are in tight relation one with the other:

- 1) the first one derives from the existential familiarity with the social world that every individual experiences, from early childhood to adulthood, through sheer participation to a community in which one is raised and in which one learns mastering ordinary language and its uses. This existential familiarity combines differential (depending on the environment) as well as universal (common principles of rationality: non-contradiction, causality, reciprocity, responsibility, etc.) elements.
- 2) the second one is acquired during the daily commitment in the countless universes of action which an individual comes to be engrossed in (family, school, business, public services, medicine, places of leisure, etc.) and allows in turn an appropriate use of the rules organizing the myriad of interactions people get involved in.
- 3) the third one comes from formal education and the many specialized trainings an individual is subjected to during lifetime.
- 4) the fourth one is related to the expertise individuals accumulate in the routines of ordinary activities and gives it a special touch.

According to this rough picture, practical knowledge can be seen as a compound which merges theoretical, abstract, instrumental, affective, emotional and sensory elements that can hardly be analytically sorted out. A substantial part of this knowledge directly derives from the prior acquaintance individuals have with the social worlds in which they are used to act in. Now, one may claim that such acquaintance provides them with a command of the requirements an action in common summons them to abide by according to the role they play in it. And as such a command can be thought of as shared by all the partners involved in a situated interaction, one may conjecture that this is what may account for the fluid accomplishment of coordination between them.

To sum up: while Dewey's theory of inquiry gives a decisive place to the implementation of experimental reasoning for the sake of problem solving, it does not really comment on how individuals apply it. In his perspective, the intelligence of

individuals is less important than the collective intelligence that is deployed during the inquiry. As he states:

“A more intelligent state of social affairs - a state that is more driven by intelligence - would not improve the original endowment [of each individual] in any way, but it would raise the level at which the intelligence of all operates. The height of this level is much more important for the judgment of public concerns than are the differences in intelligence quotients.” (Dewey, 1984: 313-314)

Dewey nevertheless acknowledges that, in contemporary democratic societies, public problems require the mobilization of specialized knowledge to identify them and to point to the most rational solution possible in terms of its consequences. While this work of identification and proposal may be the prerogative of experts, the decision must not be left to them only. Final decision should be taken by the ordinary citizens who are concerned by a problem which prompted their constitution as “public”; and the competence which is required of these ordinary citizens just amounts, according to Dewey, to being able to understand the information these experts produce and organize their collective inquiry on the basis of the relevant data these experts should exhaustively and willfully provide them. A question still remains unanswered: where does such a competence come from?

#### **4. Citizenship in Action**

As the ancient Greeks pointed out, every society is constituted and lives at the crossroads of two fields of social activity: politics, which is a specific sphere of practical action the purpose of which is the constant establishment and adjustment of the institutional framework in charge of the functioning of government, representation and participation; and the realm of the political, which is this other sphere of practical action the purpose of which is to establish and foster an order of social and power relationships between people leaving together within a given political entity whatever the particular community they belong to (Finley, 1976; Klimis, 2018).

The distinction between politics and the realm of the political is not clear-cut: between these two spheres of practical action, the back and forth is permanent. The way in which life in society is organised in the daily involvements of individuals in social relations of work, cooperation and reciprocity – i.e. the realm of the political – is the crucible in which the collective mores that give politics its nature and tone are forged. It is also in this realm that citizens’ claims for rights, freedom, dignity and security are expressed; and here too that the institutional arrangements that reflect the state of morals are prefigured. In modern states, while it is in the realm of the political that any demand for the deepening of democracy emerges, for it to become common law, it must necessarily be brought to the level of politics, which is the only one allowing for turning such claims into legislative or regulatory statutes.

The life of any society therefore beats to the rhythm of this back and forth; and all its members (whether “national” or not) take part in this collective activity which consists in renewing, by continuously adjusting them, their collective ways of life and the social and political relations that bind them. This activity is what can be called the “political work” a society does on itself. It therefore allows recognizing that all members of a society are cogent practitioners and explorers of politics; and that if they are, it is to the extent that they simply acquire, by necessity, a more or less elaborate and thoughtful knowledge about the form of social and political organization in which they live, and a more or less articulated idea of the one in which they would like to live. In a word, ordinary citizens are able to discover together what the relationships that bind them should be.

On this account, democracy cannot be reduced to a political regime in which election and delegation are the cornerstone, but is accomplished in the actualisation of the principles of equality, autonomy and pluralism that ordinary citizens give life to on a daily basis. In other words, democracy should be seen as a form of life as much as a political regime (Ogien, 2015).

Sociology and social anthropology have by and large demonstrated that the power enjoyed by those who govern is never absolute: the activity of government (even in the case of tyranny) is always carried out under the inquisitive or amused gaze of citizens, which forces rulers to take into account, in a more or less resolute way, what the governed say about how the administration of public affairs should be conducted (Balandier, 1967). What characterizes a democratic regime is the fact that the range of forms of political action that express this view is abundant: election, partisan opposition, trade unionism, petition, public debate, opinion polling, demonstration, strike, but also abstention, boycott, moderate or symbolic use of violence, civil disobedience, without excluding riot, revolt, insurrection, and without forgetting slander, rumors, sarcasm, irony or indifference. The mere existence of so many different forms of political action and the fact that all of them are regularly made use of according to given circumstances is a good reason to assume that ordinary citizens know when, how and why they should collectively select the one they find most appropriate to stake a particular claim and hopefully get satisfied. In other words, that they master a sufficiently sound practical knowledge about the workings of the regime under which they live which qualifies them to express political demands on legitimate grounds.

In support of this proposition, some arguments can be drawn from the empirical analysis of the uses citizens make of all sorts of extra-parliamentary political actions. At one end of the spectrum are forms of nonviolent action adopted by activists who either fight against the development of GMO's by mowing corn or beet fields to demand the cessation of this type of open-air cultivation; or set up tent camps in the streets or requisition empty buildings to push for the Right to Housing; or trespass private property to denounce governments' inaction toward the urgency of climate change. Resorting to these modes of protest aims at publicly question the



legitimacy of public policies that allow the sowing and consumption of plants that are supposed to pose a serious threat to humanity; or do not meet the existential needs of the homeless; or allow the forthcoming of climate breakdown, biodiversity loss and ecological collapse. This kind of illegal action is generally implemented as a means to strengthen the power of an association or a NGO as they are implied in an ongoing negotiation or to back up the struggle of a parliamentary opposition to pass a legislation. Other forms of illegal action can also be made use of to advance a political claim, like engaging in direct violence (deliberate clashes against the police, looting, or looting during authorized demonstrations), sabotage or assassinations (as during the post 1968 “years of lead”) in order to allegedly put an end to a system of domination they abominate.

At the other end of the spectrum are forms of political action that reject the use of violence but deliberately organized outside the representative system. This is the case, for example, of the commitment of citizens who spontaneously assist migrants without documents, even if they are informed of the risk of being prosecuted and punished, or of being subjected to harassment by the police or the judiciary. At a higher level, this assistance can take the form of political action that seeks to force the public authorities to stop repressive measures against illegal migrants, to put an end to the arbitrary nature of the regularization procedures or to revise legislation on illegal aliens. A last type of non-violent political action is civil disobedience, which consists in deliberately committing an offence by refusing to fulfill a legal or regulatory obligation on the grounds that it is shameful, degrading, unjust or that it puts a public service in jeopardy or even more denies democracy.

This brief review of the some forms of political action ordinary citizens are able to resort to shows that politics cannot be reduced, as Dewey’s conception suggests, to the implementation of a method of solving social policy problems. Part of the problems that citizens in State societies face are founded on disagreement and dissension about the ends that the community to which they belong should pursue. And one may argue that inquiries that focus on these ends are different in nature from those which are concerned with an “end- in-view” adjusted to the solving of a particular public problem.

To sum up: one may claim that every citizen knows, by the mere fact of living within the bounds of a State, what is the political order he is involved in. In other words, an ordinary conception of politics manifests itself in all forms of the practical judgment that ordinary citizens (or groups like trade unions, associations, collectives, etc.) make about the ways power is being exercised and the participation or representative procedures that associate them with this exercise. In other words, the political order prevailing in a society cannot be considered as if it were totally detached from the daily lives of its members.

## Conclusion

The notion of political competence accounts for to the fact that when individuals act in common in a situation defined as political, they have to refer to obligations they know they should better abide by – even though they are free not to do so. Where do they get this awareness of normativity from ? First of all, from the ceaseless attendance to the social worlds they have been raised in, since very early childhood. On these premises, the intelligibility of things as they happen can be seen as a “natural” phenomenon - assuming that nature is social through and through. We all probably accept the idea that the each and every environment of action in which we find ourselves in the changing circumstances of daily life never presents itself to us as a totally indecipherable chaos. They are, in a certain sense, “always already” known to us. That is why we do not have any problem to directly engage in action with others on the basis of our ordinary familiarity with what should happen in them. And if this is so it is because such a familiarity incorporates a series of guidelines specifying how one is to relate to others in a given situation. The fact that individuals succeed in mutually eliciting coordination of action in common stems from their making an approximately correct use of these guidelines.

To conclude, I will come back to the topic of this article and claim that the practical accomplishment of citizenship fundamentally derives from the familiarity individuals get with the innumerable ways of acting as a citizen in the many situations in which endorsing this role seems relevant. This is eventually how ordinary citizens acquire the political competence they currently make use of to give life to democracy as regime.

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