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Practising citizenship from the ordinary to the activist

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In the literature on citizenship, both classical and contemporary, it is usually considered that the notion necessarily implies that citizens as political subjects are 'active'. While such 'activity' is differently envisioned according to the academic, theoretical, or contextual backgrounds of authors, its connections with what is usually called 'the ordinary' largely remains to be explored and empirically renewed. This chapter thus has as its main aim to offer some guidelines about the complex and intricate connections between citizenship 'activity' and ordinariness. The discussion relies on an approach of citizenship that affirms it has no essence which is immutable across time and space; indeed

> if citizenship is now increasingly recognized as a contested idea, this diversity is not a mere multiplicity of views but entails disputes between distinct, divergent or even antagonistic meanings. Specific contexts typically contain such conflicting conceptions of citizenship – and the associated attempts to install them as the recognized, legitimated and institutionalized form. Such conflicts continue, even after one conception of citizenship has been institutionalized – it remains the focus of further efforts to challenge, inflect or translate it.
> *(Clarke et al., 2013)*

After a brief overview of different approaches to 'active citizenship' and an exploration of its relationships with research advocating a deeper involvement with 'ordinariness', some proposals are made about the methodological implications of such an approach. The inclusion in citizenship studies of sensitive dimensions, of vigilance and care, as well as the need to reflect more in depth on figures of continuity or ruptures between daily activities and political subjectification are the provisional conclusions suggested.

Who is the 'active citizen'?

Active citizens tend to come in many different shapes, both in the literature and in public policies. No doubt its ancient differentiation from the passive one[1] has played an important part in the common representation according to which the active citizen is the one who votes, actively takes part in public life, and manifests interest in politics. But let us first consider a more recent

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style of active citizen, the one called for in a growing number of public policies, 'one who is no longer dependent on the welfare state and is willing to take a full part in the remaking of modern societies' (Newman and Tonkiens, 2011: 9). These authors retrace the 'paradoxical rise' of this active citizen in Western Europe, first in the claims of social movements from the 1970s onwards for a larger redistribution of power and resources. By demanding choice and autonomy for citizens, and especially women, these movements strongly contributed to the recognition of those active citizens, able and willing to shape their lives (Newman and Tonkiens, 2011). But they also offer a second reading of the contemporary success of active citizenship: that it is not 'the triumph but rather the ultimate disowning or even devouring of social movements' (ibid: 10) by policymakers. Indeed, in many sectors (care of the elderly, health or crime) active citizenship is now 'used to discipline rather than liberate and empower citizens' in a context of transformation of the welfare state. Newman and Tonkiens do not choose between these two narratives, and stress the need to empirically sustain and contextually locate 'how different forces and pressures come together in particular places, services and struggles' (ibid: 11). What has to be underlined, though, is the extent to which their analysis of such a 'paradoxical rise' is a clear example of the 'Janus' face of citizenship processes. This double-sided dimension can be located on the one hand in the fact that similar procedures, schemes, or qualities (responsibility for instance) can be referred to so as to serve very different, or indeed contradictory political projects (for different examples, see Neveu, 2011a and b; Newman and Tonkiens, 2011; Dagnino, 2007). But more generally, it points to an essential tension of citizenship processes: that they can, at the same time or successively, discipline or emancipate, enforce norms or open up new possibilities for their questioning and transformation[2]. This Janus face or citizenship processes are all the more important to stress here in that discussions, including academic ones, on active citizenship do all, to different degrees, concern this paradoxical tension.

Indeed, and this is a second figure of the active citizen, they are often described as those who comply with what is expected from them, who actively engage in prescribed forms of public activity. No doubt this figure can be found in the above-mentioned policies, but more generally speaking (and this is especially true in certain sectors of French political science), it is also that of the 'good' citizen of opinion polls and sociological research: those who can express an opinion on request, participate in elections or participatory democracy schemes, and demonstrate and mobilize in trade unions or voluntary groups. Now such 'active citizens' are often contrasted with those supposed to be their opposite: the 'ordinary' ones. Thus for Mariot:

> By paying attention to the sole militants or other '*active*' citizens […], and generally to the more involved among them, the specialist in political attitudes learns a lot about these public space *freaks* the more mobilized they are (especially in social movements), but leaves out all the *ordinary* passers-by, the members of these famous silent majorities, whatever the reasons of this apparent abstention (disinterest, 'remise de soi'', rejection, conformism or consent).
>
> *(Mariot, 2010: 92–3; my italics)*

Thus by working on 'active' (mobilized, demonstrating concern and expressing claims) citizens, social scientists would miss out on the practices, opinions and representations of the vast majority of citizens: the silent, 'ordinary' ones. This figure of the active citizen would thus be both a sociological norm (the 'good' one) and a sociological freak (an extraordinary marginal)[3].

Before discussing certain implicit representations of this conception, a third figure of the active citizen must be introduced. While it has certain common traits with the second one, it also differs from it, and again its characteristics connect it with the notion of 'ordinariness'.

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According to Isin (2009), the 'active citizen' is the one who engages in what he describes as *practices*, 'routinized social actions that are already instituted' such as tax paying, voting or enlisting; they are contrasted with the 'activist' citizen's *acts* that 'break routines, understandings and practices' (Isin, 2009: 379):

> Thus we contrast 'activist citizens' with 'active citizens' who act out already written scripts. While activist citizens engage in writing scripts and creating the scene, active citizens follow scripts and participate in scenes that are already created. While activist citizens are creative, active citizens are not.
>
> *(Isin, 2008: 38)*

As with the second figure, this type of active citizen is engaged in prescribed and planned actions[4]; but while it was in the previous case contrasted with 'ordinary' (silent) citizens, it is here contrasted with those activist citizens who 'make a difference' by questioning established roles and inventing new sites and types of citizenship. While the active citizen is somehow delegitimated in the first case for being 'too active' and vocal, in the second case it is for conformity and compliance.

This brief overview of three figures of the active citizen does not do justice to either the complexity of this notion or to each of these figures[5]. Its aim was to lay some landmarks to discuss the intricate relationships between activity and ordinariness within citizenship processes, and the methodological challenges they pose. Some of these connections have already been touched upon: silence and abstention, or engagement in routine practices, as the 'ordinary' regime of citizenship vs public space freaks or acts of citizenship.

In both cases, the 'ordinary' is thought of either as these moments when 'nothing happens' in political terms; that is 'nothing' according to a very restrictive definition of politicization that defines it as manifesting interest in the formal political sphere (parties, elections, and public debates), or as 'routines' that reproduce the usual legal and social framework. There can seem to be certain similarities between these two figures of the 'active citizen'[6]. Thus it could be considered that the activist citizen entertains striking connections with the (traditional) figure of the militant activist, with the potential risk of conveying a rather 'heroic' conception of these acts and actors, even though Isin and Nielsen, as well as several contributors to their book, underline that such acts can indeed take place in very 'ordinary' situations of daily life, such as travel on a bus, and be enacted in very 'ordinary' ways, such as 'simply' talking back. Holston also underlines the importance of 'ordinary' acts for publicly asserting one's rights and thus transform daily representations and practices, when he observes, apropos of interactions in a queue at a bank counter, that

> trafficking in public space is a realm of modern society in which city residents most frequently and predictably experience the state of their citizenship. The quality of such mundane interaction may in fact be more significant to people's sense of themselves in society than the occasional heroic experiences of citizenship like soldiering and demonstrating or the emblematic ones like voting and jury duty.
>
> *(Holston, 2008: 15)*

But these two conceptions deeply differ in their conception of citizenship, and as a consequence, in their empirical focus. Mariot starts from a predefined conception of what citizenship is[7], and conceives of the absence of visible exterior signs of 'activity' as either consent, submission, or lack of interest, while Isin, with others, conceives of citizenship as a relational process of

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subjectification, a contingent and contested institution constantly recreated by political subjects through dissent, as 'always in the making' (Balibar, 2001).

Ordinariness

Developments in citizenship studies in the last two decades have clearly marked a departure from abstract definitions and underlined its essentially fluid and disputed dimensions (see among others Hobson and Lister, 2001; Clarke *et al.*, 2013; Staeheli *et al.*, 2012; Isin 2009):

> Some current debates revolve around the question of what citizenship 'is'. But like 'democracy', citizenship is not reducible to a single definition; rather it requires and encourages interpretation, thus making the idea both exciting and useful for a wide range of people precisely because its meanings are fluid and flexible.
>
> *(Taylor and Wilson, 2004: 155)*

It flows from such conceptions that citizenship can only be grasped contextually 'in a situation', when it is 'activated'. If such 'situations' are not limited to the ones prescribed and framed by theory or law, they are not (and this is central to this chapter's argument) limited to visible and explicit scenes either. In other words, acts of citizenship can be performed in very discreet ways, through daily experiences, and under less visible guise than is usually considered, through experiences often qualified as 'ordinary'. This raises a central methodological question I will come back to: how can one grasp such discreet, 'low-noise' practices?

But before that, one needs to examine more closely the very notion of 'ordinary/ordinariness', which, like the 'active citizen', presents a complex intermingling of meanings and representations. According to Corcuff, one can distinguish three 'types' of ordinariness: a cognitive one (perception and action schemes that constitute a kind of ordinary background for our activities); a contextual one (what crops up and reproduces itself in daily life; the ordinary is here synonymous with the daily); and ordinary agents contrasted with specialists (Corcuff in Marie *et al.*, 2002). This last use of 'ordinary' is indeed often found in political science literature (see for instance Aït Aouda *et al.*, 2011), as well as in a growing number of governance schemes. Celebrated for their solid common sense, or their lay knowledge of problems through their daily uses of spaces or services, 'ordinary citizens' are called upon to participate in a whole array of commissions and schemes aiming at democratizing decision-making processes or bettering services[8]. But calling upon and celebrating ordinary citizens can also be analysed as a powerful depoliticization device:

> Ordinary people are seen as a counterbalance to the dangers and 'dirtiness' of politics – they are not contaminated with the corruption, collusion and cynicism of existing politics. [...] In the context of these concerns about 'actually existing politics', ordinary people are valorized *because they are not political*. They are seen as occupying positions that are above or below politics: below, because they are seen to be concerned with more 'everyday' issues; above, because they are not engaged in the venal, corrupt or collusive pursuit of power and self-interest in the manner of politicians.
>
> *(Clarke, 2010: 640–2)*

Indeed, and interestingly enough here, the renewed interest in 'ordinary citizens', together (and partly for the same reasons) with that in 'active citizenship', is often connected to the contemporary crisis of representative democracy and to changes in governance (see for instance Marie

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et al., 2002; Clarke, 2010). And as the 'active citizen', the ordinary one can be 'enrolled' by very different, or even opposite political projects, and endowed with a variety of qualities or defects; another example of the Janus face of citizenship processes. But in many cases, reference to the adjective 'ordinary' is not really problematized, and it then means 'daily', 'routine', and is used to designate activities which are somehow considered as not pertaining to the realm of 'politics'; to that extent those uses are connected to Clarke's argument about the (supposedly) non-political character of ordinary people, but while he analyses contextual uses aiming at depoliticizing the debate, most literature (sometimes uncritically) tries to explore the political dimensions of 'ordinary' activities. Taylor and Wilson thus argue that:

> ordinary people often engage with the powerful in scenarios that, at first sight, seem to have little to do with the stuff of citizenship (funeral dances, religious sects, marching competitions, school gardens) yet in politicized context these activities have a great deal to do with the nitty-gritty negotiations of power, reckoning up of political deals, exercise of political agency, declaration and redefinition of 'belonging' and, therefore, the very fabric of citizenship.
>
> *(Taylor and Wilson, 2004: 157)*

Yet in line with Corcuff's distinction between different realms of the ordinary, but adding another dimension are a number of authors who underline the etymological connection between the 'ordinary' and the rule; Favre underlines that as a noun '*ordinaire*' refers to 'repeated moments or practices in institutions where a power is exercised on the individual: it has to be remembered, the "ordinary" is here linked to hierarchised social orders, the church and the army' (Favre in Marie *et al.*, 2002: 277); and for Staeheli *et al.*:

> Ordinary is often taken to mean standard, routine, or average, but its etymology refers to the Latin word for order, including social and legal order. We use the broader meaning of ordinary to highlight the ways in which citizenship is simultaneously constituted through encounters with law and daily life. [...] Ordinariness thus fuses legal structures, normative orders, and the practices and experiences of individuals, social groups and communities, making citizenship both a general category and a contingent resource for political life.
>
> *(Staeheli et al., 2012: 630–1)*

As can be seen from this brief discussion, ordinariness is not a straightforward category; it can be used in many different ways and sustain a variety of approaches. What is more, whether it is used in common conversation, mobilized in public policy, or critically discussed as a category for social sciences, the reference to the ordinary should also be understood contextually. Indeed in certain contexts or depending on who acts, any given activity can be ordinary or not[9]; even in very 'extraordinary' moments, such as revolutions, there can be ordinary moments too. And as Joseph usefully reminds us: 'On the street, the unexpected is not opposed to the ordinary, it is on the contrary its routine' (Joseph in Marie *et al.*, 2002: 98).

The 'ordinary' here will be approached as the way through which members of a society produce, in the lived world, an understanding of their universe and endow it with meaning (Pharo, 1985); it can thus allow for highlighting the competences anyone draws from its daily experiences, competences to perceive, practise, and formulate judgements on the 'vivre-ensemble' and the common good, especially outside or at the margins of practices and sites 'branded' by classical approaches to citizenship. So here, the ordinary will be used as a tool to include in the frame that which usually does not have access to *visibility*, neither for policies nor often from researchers, those 'feeble signals' of citizenship (Carrel and Neveu, 2013).

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Empirically exploring feeble signals

As has been said earlier, there is now a huge social science literature exploring the discreet, 'ordinary' processes through which people 'become political' (Isin, 2002, 2009). Boudreau *et al.* have thus analysed how Latina women with no such previous experience finally ended up joining the US marches against immigration reform in Los Angeles, and explored the continuities between daily experiences of the city and political events (Boudreau *et al.*, 2009).

But exploring the political and citizenship 'in the ordinary' does carry some methodological difficulties and necessities. The first one is certainly the time span required; in her research, Overney spent ten years following and observing a group of residents in Lyons. She was thus able not only to locate the 'feeble signals' of 'low-noise' practices, but above all to grasp the meanings people endow them with and their accumulation over time (Overney in Carrel and Neveu, 2013). While not necessarily requiring such a long time span, empirically grounding the analysis of 'low-noise' practices and acts does need time. After having explored citizenship processes in mostly 'branded' spaces and sites (neighbourhood committees, local volunteer groups, i.e. places where 'active'/'activist' citizens usually gather), I am myself engaged in long-term fieldwork at a community centre (*centre social*) in a small city in France. This *centre social* has been selected because of its banality[10] and understanding how processes of 'becoming political' can emerge through such routine activities as social gatherings held once a week or how training young people for childcare cannot be done within a few weeks, nor can it be grasped solely by interviews.

'Tracking' ordinary citizenship might also require some sort of 'cultural intimacy' (Herzfeld, 2005). In his research on figures of citizenship in a secular scout group[11] Vanhoenacker shows how his own training as an *éclaireur* made him aware that 'citizenship' was a central notion for the group, even though it was never mentioned or hardly referred to in its daily activities. Literally 'scouting' to identify the feeble marks and follow the tenuous trails of this 'ordinary citizenship', his complete participation in the local group allowed him to locate *in situ* references to, and uses of, citizenship without delimiting a priori its sites or times of occurrence:

> Such an ethnographic approach of citizenship is interesting precisely in that it does not presuppose its architecture: it is not about assuming the citizenly character of volunteering or of a certain relationship to authority or the public good, but on the contrary about letting these relations [of citizenship] spread themselves through the intersubjective relations that exist within the group.
>
> *(Vanhoenacker, in Carrel and Neveu, 2013)*

Apart from these useful insights on the effects of such 'cultural intimacy', this research opens up another relevant field for the current discussion. Following the 'trail' of citizenship through a multi-sited ethnography (within the local group and the national headquarters), Vanhoenacker progressively realized that the 'ordinary citizenship' his own experience told him was so central to the EEDF (*Éclaireuses et Éclaireurs de France*, the French guide and scout association), was indeed not so 'ordinary'. 'Citizenship talk' (Clarke, 2011) within the EEDF is in fact a tool adults use both to (re)present the secular scout movement to public authorities and as a means to (try and) control the 'youth societies'. The local groups are, thus enacting the paradox of the 'education of the sovereign': 'follow me and you will be autonomous'; once again, Janus shows his disciplinary/empowering faces.

If an in-depth, prolonged, and sometimes multi-sited fieldwork is necessary to locate and understand 'low-noise' acts of citizenship or less visible (or rendered invisible) ways of 'being political', it is also because citizenship (in the processual and fluid conception adopted here) has

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strong connections with vigilance and care: 'As a "constraint to follow up things", vigilance is close to citizenship (Chateauraynaud, 1999)' (Overney in Carrel and Neveu, 2013). In her research on a group of people involved in their neighbourhood in Lyons, she considers that:

> If one intends to take seriously this involvement for and in the neighbourhood, vigilance would belong to a "small politics": the issues about which the GTI [the name of the group] warn are in priority and in their majority those taking place in La Duchère [the name of the neighbourhood] or that matter to it. The public critics carried by participants relies on small resources, those "arts of doing" (De Certeau, 1990) forged along their usual, actual and singular attachments to places, by a very close view on the issues. But observation shows these should not too quickly be stripped of political scope. The way inhabitants apprehend and "journey" through the neighbourhood, how they enquire after issues that concern them, must be paid full attention [...] The aim is to describe these experiences of the neighbourhood that constitute the forms of an ordinary political participation, and thus precise the content of this small politics.
>
> *(Overney in Carrel and Neveu, 2013)*

Yet such attention paid to daily and discreet vigilance and care practices, and to the acts that follow them, requires taking some distance with citizenship conceived as a view from afar, a generalized standing point, or as purely individual; in other words, to decentre citizenship from its taken-for-granted meta-narratives (see Clarke *et al.*, 2013), and especially the liberal one that still dominates much research and theorization on it. This is also what Staeheli *et al.* underline:

> The concept of ordinary allows us to consider values and rationalities beyond those generally associated with liberal democracy, that are mobilized in political debate and contestation, and that are enacted in the everyday. Situating citizenship in daily life allows other rationalities and other values to enter politics as legitimate and normal, such as values of care, mutuality, love, respect, and other-regardingness.
>
> *(Staeheli et al., 2012: 630)*

This is no doubt a central issue, both in conceptual and methodological terms: exploring 'ordinary' low-noise acts of citizenship requires including in the frame attachments, feelings, and emotions, and sensitive relationships to sites and people. It thus requires considering citizens and citizenship, as practised and lived, as anything but unencumbered (ibid: 637). To that extent, attention, care, and vigilance as daily, routine acts of citizenship also question the notion that in order to be 'good citizens' political subjects should 'look after their own affairs' instead of worrying about the common ones, and complicate simplistic visions according to which contemporary processes of individuation would mean a growing indifference and a lack of solidarity and concern (Ion, 2008). As Isin and Nielsen stress:

> [Nielsen's chapter] demonstrates how ordinary acts of citizenship emerge, breaking with assumed civic norms and habits. An alternative approach to citizenship studies focuses on acts that challenge the non-participatory stance assumed when we travel under the assumption that we live together not across difference but also out of a much-needed indifference.
>
> *(Isin and Nielsen, 2008: 9)*

'Participation' then (and this is also an important issue for empirical research) should not be looked for only in the sites that public institutions brand as 'dedicated' to it (neighbourhood

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committees, users' commissions, or public debate devices), nor only in the explicit and visible moments of its collective and public expression (demonstrations or mobilizations); but also in mundane practices of being and talking together about common concerns, taking the bus daily, and thus discovering social and spatial segregation in the city and sharing this experience with other passengers (Boudreau *et al.*, 2009), challenging public norms and habits (Holston, 2008); all 'these sorts of small actions, challenges, and the experiments to which they give rise can lead to varied forms of contact and engagement that hold the potential to nudge established patterns of control and authority and to anticipate new political acts' (Staeheli *et al.*, 2012: 630).

To that extent, the search for acts of citizenship within the ordinary should also include exploring citizenship *practices* (in the meaning given to this word by Isin). Indeed as conforming, banal, and compliant as they might seem, they can also be subverted and endowed with dissenting meanings and representations. In a very stimulating piece of research on voting in India, Banerjee uncovers how voting can be grasped as an *act*, and not just a practice, of citizenship. She shows that low-caste villagers in Bengal vote in very large numbers not because they consider this will change their daily living conditions, or because they trust in corrupt politicians seeking their vote. They do so because it is one of the few occasions they have to actually feel the equality of all citizens (one person, one vote) in an otherwise highly unequal society, and because they can sensitively experiment with this equality while queuing for hours at the polling station with voters of all castes (Banerjee, 2012).

What has been pleaded for in this chapter is an approach to citizenship processes and acts that would pay close attention to their groundings in 'ordinariness'. The issue is not one of getting lost in the analysis of minuscule interactions in daily life that would lose sight of the wider scenes and contexts in which people act and struggle[12]; nor is it one of praising the 'ordinary' as more vital to citizenship processes than their more exceptional and/or visible expressions. What has been argued for is the need not to contribute further to rendering invisible certain types of acts such as 'banal' and discreet vigilance, worry, and care for sites, people and relationships. Including such sensitive, creative, subversive and (sometimes) 'ordinary' dimensions in the analysis implies both distancing oneself from the dominant liberal meta-narrative on citizenship, and using methodological tools adapted to such a standpoint.

What still has to be explored in depth are issues of continuities and ruptures, the conditions of circulations between the different scenes of citizenship acts (discreet, feeble, tenuous and public, vocal), and how thresholds can be passed, how, why and when such trespassing become irreversible by changing so deeply the context and aspirations that no return to the previous ones could be envisioned.

Notes

1 Especially during the French Revolution, when only propertied and tax-paying male individuals were considered 'active citizens'.

2 This Janus dimension of citizenship can also be observed in such practices as voting; Déloye thus showed how educating (future) voters in the French Republican school of the early twentieth centry also implied teaching them that going on strike was not a 'relevant' choice for (good) citizens; see Déloye, 1994.

3 Such a conception attributes to 'margins' precisely a marginal status, the really sociologically and politically relevant processes being those taking place within the numerical majority; for a discussion of, and references for, this view of 'margins' and centre, see among others Neveu 2013.

4 Indeed what is here described as 'practices' and 'acts' could be considered as belonging respectively to the 'disciplinary' and 'empowerment' sides of citizenship referred to above.

5 Newman and Tonkiens stress the need for detailed empirical research to grasp the meanings of 'active citizenship' in different contexts (2011: 11); as they also underline (ibid: 19) such a contextualization

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should be extended to the reading of social science literature, since the 'qualities' attributed to active citizens also depend on who the authors are 'discussing' with, i.e. the context of their research. Thus Mariot is engaged in a critical discussion with certain sectors of French political science, while Isin's theorization of acts might also be connected to the fact that 'citizenship' is often reduced in English-language literature to a formal status (and considered as identical to nationality).

6 As for the 'active citizen' in Newman and Tonkiens, the aim is first of all to empirically understand what this term means and refers to in context; such an approach is thus in line with Isin's proposal to pay attention to 'what is called citizenship' instead of defining it abstractly.

7 As well as from a disputable notion that what theory says does actually exist in reality; see Neveu 2013.

8 But again, such a 'category' is more complex than this 'simple' contrast between lay people and specialists; thus certain analysts consider that those participating in such commissions and schemes cannot be defined as 'ordinary citizens', precisely because they are 'active' and thus not 'really' ordinary (Mariot, 2010).

9 Thus Jobard underlines that beating up demonstrators can be very ordinary for riot police, while being beaten might not be so for demonstrators themselves (quoted in Marie *et al.*, 2002)

10 I.e. located in a very 'ordinary' neighbourhood with no specific 'problems'. A *centre social* is a neighbourhood facility, usually run by a volunteer group supported by local authorities and public funding, that provides different support for the population such as sports and cultural activities, childcare, as well as informal meeting spaces.

11 *Eclaireuses et Eclaireurs de France* (EEDF), the French guide and scout accociation was created in France in 1911. See Vanhoenacker, 2011 and 2013.

12 A tendency that can be found in *certain* pragmatist approaches; and pragmatic sociology tends to occupy a significant part of the research on citizenship and participation in France.

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