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Cherry Picking and Politics: Conceptualizing Ordinary Forms of Politicization

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Abstract

By revisiting three empirical qualitative studies, the paper elaborates on conceptual and methodological issues pertaining to clarification of the use of the concept of politicization and "ordinary relationships to politics." The first study was conducted at the end of the 1990s on voluntary associations of young people of foreign descent in the French suburbs; the second was devoted to ordinary relationships to politics among young people in working-class neighborhoods in France; the third involves ongoing fieldwork examining non-profit organizations and their relationship to the state, focusing notably on evangelical non-profits in the Boston area of the USA. Although the research questions were different, they dealt with ordinary relationships to politics (ORP). This notion encompasses two dimensions. On the one hand, the idea that what determines one's relationship to politics is not only political, but also social: that we need to "embed" the study of relationships to politics into social dimensions. This is related to the study of *the determination of relationships to politics*. On the other hand, the idea that a relationship to politics is not only a relationship to the institutionalized political field, but that we need to adopt a broader definition of what politicization is, in order to grasp its ordinary forms, especially—but not only—when we deal with the working class. In this case, what is at stake is *the definition of politicization*. Nowadays, there is relative consensus in the literature regarding the determination of relationships to politics, but the definition of what politicization is remains much more controversial. In this paper, I present the terms of this controversy and the value in and limits of the various perspectives and, more specifically, I elaborate on how the changes in the type of fieldwork I conducted, in the national contexts, and the theoretical questions I asked impacted on the way I chose to define politicization. I suggest combining three definitions of politicization: (i) the legitimist or realist conception based on the relationship to the institutional political sphere; (ii) the conception of politicization as the identification of shared problems calling for collective solutions; and finally, (iii) approaching politicization

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as the readiness to be moved, to consider points of view other than those initially adopted.

Introduction

After the study of conventional forms of participation, such as voting, reading newspapers, and talking about politics that prevailed in political science from the 1940s to the beginning of the 1970s (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944; Campbell et al., 1960), and the extension of the body of work to include so-called non-conventional forms of participation (Barnes & Kaase, 1979), such as petitioning, demonstrating, and protesting via sit-ins or die-ins, which occurred in the late 1970s, social scientists have lately been considering enlarging the scope further to incorporate lifestyle politics and informal forms of participation. This includes such things as hosting refugees in one's home, becoming vegan, dumpster diving, etc. As part of this movement, this special issue focuses on informal, individualized, weakly coordinated participatory actions that take place outside the realm of institutions, and the various papers analyze the political dimensions of such forms of participation. But if one wants to broaden the scope of what one considers political, it is crucial to clarify what political means, how to spot it in empirical data, and what one expects from such a definition. Since the 1960s and the feminist movement, we know that everything can be political. But this is not to say that everything is always political—otherwise, nothing would be.

In this paper, I would like to elaborate on this notional reflection of what politicization means, and how we can trace it in empirical data. And rather than talking about definitions, my goal here is to *clarify the contexts* in which the term is used, and define the *functions* attributed to it. This is what Max Black suggests, in a different field, when he discusses the concept of *mathematical sets*: "perhaps set cannot be defined, upon some restrictive interpretation of definition; but its employment can surely be elucidated. The point is not to 'define' the word, but to delineate its functions – and that, too, deserves to be called definition" (Black, 1975, p. 88; cited by Williams, 1998, p. 18). This is also how Olivier Fillieule encourages us to think about the definition of social movements. He concludes his reflection stating that "at the end of this critical study on the matter of defining the scope of the sociology of social movements, [he hopes] to have shown the importance of putting the object back on the agenda, not to ultimately state an intangible truth, but rather to draw attention to the implications of any a priori reduction of the object and the resulting effects of blindness" and by a lively appeal to "make objects speak!" (Fillieule, 2009, p. 36). From a pragmatist standpoint, this paper will be useful in helping to ask new questions and making new observations possible (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012, p. 174; Dewey, 1925; James, 1981 [1907]).

I will do so drawing on three studies I conducted on ordinary relationships to politics. The first was conducted during my dissertation (Hamidi, 2010): I studied

local non-profits involving young people from immigrant backgrounds in the French suburbs, and I analyzed the ways in which voluntary associations constitute—but more often than not do not constitute—gateways to the public space and the political universe. In the context of the 1990s, non-profits were often considered to be places of politicization that could replace political institutions, such as political parties and trade unions, which were in relative decline. However, the processes that took place within them were rarely investigated as such: this is what I sought to study by entering the "black box" of voluntary associations. To do this, I relied on ethnographic observation carried out over more than 2 years, mainly in three voluntary associations in the Parisian suburb of Saint-Denis, and in Nantes. The observation was accompanied by semi-directive interviews ($n = 50$) with managers, members, and to a lesser extent with people from local institutions and donors.

In the second survey,[1] devoted to the ordinary relationship to politics among young people in working-class neighborhoods, I was more specifically interested in the way individuals mobilize, or not, ethnic categories to find their way around politically. The survey is based on some thirty semi-directive interviews conducted with young people aged 18 to 35 living in working-class neighborhoods in Vaulx-en-Velin (a suburb of Lyon). These interviews focus on the young people's relationship to politics in the broadest sense (both voting and various forms of engagement, but also their feelings of possible injustice), their relationship to the neighborhood, and their biographical backgrounds. The interview grid did not include a specific entry devoted to ethnicity, so I entered it obliquely. I then reworked these interviews as part of a project on the reanalysis of qualitative surveys, which meant re-analyzing qualitative material collected in previous surveys either by asking the same questions again or by moving the questions around. The challenge of this notional work was also to provide myself with tools for identifying politicization within the framework of this research.

In the third study, which is still ongoing, I am interested in non-profits that provide services, but which are not purely in compliance with public authority orders, in the Boston metropolitan area. I seek to understand both the system of very strong institutional constraints in which these structures find themselves and how this affects the ability of associations to be places of politicization. The investigation focuses on associations that fall within the field of social justice: they deal with the issues of homelessness, with the social consequences of gentrification and with matters of racial inequality. Within this framework, I conducted interviews ($n = 60$ so far) at different voluntary associations and carried out a participant observation over several months at evangelist organizations (churches and para-church), participating in particular in their actions aimed at the homeless.[2]

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[1] The study was conducted as part of a project funded by the ANR on Rébellions urbaines versus associations: "racialisation" et construction du genre (1968-2005), from 2006 to 2010, and re-analysed as part of another project funded by the ANR, "REANALYSE. Expérimentation d'archivage et d'analyse secondaire des enquêtes qualitatives," from 2010 to 2014. It gave way to my *Habilitation à Diriger des Recherches* ("accreditation to supervize research", Hamidi, 2021), upon which I draw in this paper.

[2] This research was funded by the FNRS, in Belgium, as part of the RAPPOPAP project ("Quelle(s) relation(s) au politique et à l'action publique des populations pauvres et précaires ? Une comparaison

When I began my dissertation in the late 1990s, in mainstream political science, as well as in the Bourdieusian tradition in France, the most influential definitions of politicization were very demanding and led to the conclusion that most citizens, notably the working class, are apathetic. But for several reasons, I, along with some colleagues, was not entirely satisfied with this diagnosis (2). This led me to develop a broader definition of politicization, focusing on two elements: conflictuality and the "rise in generality" (*montée en généralité*: term describing a move away from the specific to more general patterns), which enabled me to see further political dimensions in what people say (3). This definition or similar definitions are now fairly widely used in political sociology. However, the discussions I have had on these issues since, and the fieldwork I have undertaken both in France and in the USA, have prompted me to return to this definition, and here I propose to reframe that broad definition of politicization (4). Finally, building on feminist thinking on power, I suggest another extension, in order to incorporate some dimensions that are missing from this extended definition (5). Returning to these different stages, which clearly show the iterative nature of the relationship between theory and data, I will evoke my epistemological positioning, which borrowed from abduction (stages 2 and 5) as well as from the extended case method (stage 4). Studies on the ties between non-profits and the political sphere, and on the matter of ordinary relationships to politics of the working class, which form two of the central questions of my research, remain fragmented, with little accumulation of knowledge between paradigms. Without seeking to standardize definitions and approaches, it seems that making them more explicit and specifying the dimensions observed, as I would like to do here, would help produce more convincing and cumulative findings on these issues. I will return to these aspects in closing.

Relationships to Politics and Politicization: a "Sponge Concept?"

In recent decades, the matter of politicization has sparked growing interest in French political science. The term politicization can be used to study: particular social groups (Agrikoliansky, 2014); public policy issues (Lorcerie, 2005); the way in which an actor, such as an international organization, contributes to the (de)politicization of issues (West European Politics, 2016; Louis & Maertens, 2021); the actions of a non-profit involved in public policy (Fischer, 2016); or discussions in a given sphere, to give just a few examples. Aït-Aoudia et al. (2010) warn that it has become a "sponge concept." Interest in the concept of "politicization" emerged first among historians, above all from debates on the politicization of peasants in the nineteenth century (Deloye & Haegel, 2019). The debate, triggered in particular by the French translation of the work by E. Weber (1976), falls within discussions involving both French and American historians (Agulhon, 1979 [1970]; Corbin, 1975; McPhee, 1992). Without seeking to be exhaustive or to discuss the challenges of all the concepts or notions put forward, I would highlight the proliferation

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Footnote 2 (continued)

quantitative et qualitative entre la Belgique, la France et les Etats-Unis»). This paper draws on my *Habilitation à Diriger des Recherches* ("accreditation to supervize research', Hamidi, 2021).

of the term in political science and sociology. It is integral to the notions of "politics elsewhere" (*politique ailleurs*) (Darras, 1998) and "unidentified political objects" (*Objets Politiques Non Identifiés*—OPNI) (Martin, 2002), both of which focus on the political significance of cultural objects seemingly far removed from the political (music, jokes, etc.), as well as "politics without appearing political", "informal politics" (Offerlé & Le Gall, 2012), which emphasizes informality and playing with crossing the borders of the political arena (Arnaud & Guionnet, 2005), "infrapolitics" (Scott, 1992), which is more concerned with the ordinary forms of resistance of subordinates, in line with the seminal work of micro-historians (Ginzburg, 1992), "bottom-up politics," developed by Africanists seeking to highlight activities conducted outside the sphere of the state, but which could still influence it (Bayard et al., 1992), "practical politicization"(Pudal, 2004) to denote a specific relationship to politics, that of the working class, and "ordinary politics" or "lay politics" (Buton et al., 2016). Most of these notions have been hotly debated, and it seems important to have them in mind in order to produce a more cumulative consideration of these issues. In this paper, I will address and elaborate on discussions of politicization and ordinary relationships to politics.

The use of the term *rapports ordinaires au politique* ("ordinary relationships to politics") is not standardized, but it usually carries two implications. Firstly, it refers to the idea that the determining factors of the layperson's relationship to politics (as opposed to that of political professionals[3]) are not only found in the political sphere itself (electoral programs, voting methods, etc.), but also in "non-political determining factors of politics" (Aït-Aoudia et al., 2010, p. 217). It therefore becomes a matter of reworking the study of political engagement into the study of social relations (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944). This is currently the subject of fairly widespread (although not unanimous) agreement in political sociology. Secondly, the term implies a broader understanding of politicization, given that the relationship to politics is not only reflected in the relationship to the institutional political sphere, but also in the expression—under certain conditions—of forms of discontent or feelings of injustice. We are therefore in the realm of attempting to define politicization, and discussing the merit of adopting a broader conception of it. This is where we see vehement disagreement, and is what I wish to explore in this paper.[4]

Why a Broader Definition of Politicization?

In the work of the historians I mentioned earlier, the study of politicization was developed as a reflection on the professionalization and autonomy of the political sphere (Offerlé & Le Gall, 2012). In the pioneering works conducted in political sociology in the USA, politicization was measured by the degree of political sophistication: the

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[3] That excludes elected officials and their entourages, political commentators, journalists, and political scientists.

[4] Of course, these two dimensions can be linked: for instance, tendentially, adopting a social understanding of the determining factors of the relationship to politics may encourage a broader definition of politicization, but this is not always the case. It therefore seems that we would benefit from an intellectual separation of these two factors.

amount of political knowledge people master and the degree of coherence and stability of their opinions (Campbell et al., 1960). In the analysis of Pierre Bourdieu, it is framed within the notion of political competence, "the feeling (socially allowed and encouraged) of being allowed to talk politics by implementing a specific political culture" (Bourdieu, 1979, p. 479; Gaxie, 1978, 1993). Despite their differences, in these traditions, "the term politicization commonly refers to an individual's relationship to the political sphere and the outcome of a process, which is measured by a set of indicators of individuals' interest in, knowledge of, and engagement in specialized politics" (Deloye & Haegel, 2019, p. 69). This "narrow" or "legitimizing" definition, if we take a critical view (cf. infra)—or realistic in the eyes of those who support it—is set out in detail by Buton et al., in the introduction to their work (2016, p. 12): "only that which falls within the activities of political specialists must be labelled as political, a social activity which, in (…) Western societies (…) is not only differentiated and specialized, but also largely autonomous and, as such, segregative and excluding (both in terms of participants and issues addressed)." They continue: "The 'relationship to politics' refers to the socially differentiated and unequal relationship to legitimate politics, to the political sphere and its actors, and to its triumphs and specific issues, and political competence can be measured through knowledge and recognition of specific political outcomes (individuals, party loyalties, functions, etc.). In this sense, whoever is capable of 'responding politically to questions formulated in the logic of political competition' (Lacroix, 1985; Lagroye, 2003) is politicized."

For several reasons, this influential line of reasoning left me unsatisfied, along with my colleagues.[5] In my dissertation, I worked in particular with leisure, dance, and sewing associations, and I took part in their activities and observed their discussions. Armed with these strict and demanding definitions of politicization, I spent the first few months of my observations concerned that I would not identify anything that could be considered a political reflection on the issues at hand. It was in part this practical argument that prompted me to adopt a broader definition. But it was also that it seemed that, first, the definitions already contained the findings themselves: starting with the observation of a specialized political order, with definitions according to which "discourse is politicized only when this order is explicitly invoked or when stakeholders in this sphere are the bearers of the discourse" (Hamidi, 2006, p. 10; Lagroye, 2003), we are led, by design, to note the distance between laypeople and this sphere. Secondly, as Jean Leca points out in his seminal article on "Le repérage du politique," adopting a definition modelled on the boundaries of the political sphere as it stands, and as such the result of a concentrated balance of forces makes "those who have an interest in maintaining these boundaries, so as to maintain their dominance, arbiters of the boundaries of politics" (Leca, 1971, p. 15). Here, we note the classic objection that can be made to such approaches, as being "legitimizing" (Grignon & Passeron, 1989). As Claude Grignon points out, when asked about the analysis of relationships to politics: "The legitimizing perspective effectively highlights the apoliticism of the working classes and remains there, without being able

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[5] This research group organized at the Cevipof by Sophie Duchesne and Florence Haegel also brought together Céline Braconnier, Pierre Lefébure, Sophie Maurer, and Vanessa Scherrer and myself (Duchesne et al., 2003).

to explain what this means. Like in matters of taste or cultural consumption, it is easy to fall into a state of misery – we measure the gap that separates the dominated classes from legitimate practice, and count abstentions, non-responses, refusals, expressions of indifference or resignation, which always end up being interpreted in a negative way, as non-engagement" (Grignon, 1991, p. 39). In a more controversial manner, he adds: "In politics and other spheres, the legitimizing sociologist believes that the working classes are silent, because he does not know that he is deaf" (Ibid).

These various elements prompted me to adopt a broader definition of politicization: the observation that individuals may not have mastered the specialized political sphere while simultaneously feeling that there are things wrong in society, that there are those who are more privileged than others, feelings of injustice, anger, or resentment, and so on. The same relationship of a lack of political understanding and a feeling of isolation from institutional politics can therefore give rise to a variety of reactions: a feeling of incomprehension, incompetence and illegitimacy, of course, as well as the belief that "we aren't being fooled," for example, to briefly evoke Richard Hoggarth's analysis (Hoggarth, 1970 [1957]).[6]

Politicization as Rise in Generality and Conflictuality: What Can Be Seen?

Following an abductive process,[7] we built on analysis by Jean Leca (1971) and Luc Boltanski (1990) on the one hand, and by William Gamson (1992, pp. 7–8), Hanna Pitkin (1981), and Eliasoph (1988) on the other. And we came up with a broader definition of politicization (Duchesne et al., 2003; Hamidi, 2006; Duchesne & Haegel, 2007). We decided to apply two criteria to identify the politicization at work in lay discourse: "the reference to general principles governing a society, or, in Boltanski's terms, the "rise in generality,"[8] and the recognition of the conflictual dimension of the positions adopted (in the sense that the speaker admits the existence of divergences in the matter at hand, and not in the sense that it would necessarily involve a discursive register that contests or challenges)" (Hamidi, 2006, p. 10).

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[6] "The man of the people knows that he does not have the means to make an informed judgement, but what does this matter, when he feels that they are trying to 'dupe him', to 'stick him in it'. For generations he's been wary of political chatter, he "sees what they're getting at", and is constantly on guard: *I'm not falling for this.*".

[7] Building on Peirce's analysis (1935), Timmermans and Tivory define abduction as "an inferential creative process of producing new hypotheses and theories based on surprising research evidence" (Timmermans & Tivory, 2012, p. 172). They stress the fact that in the abduction process, the researcher draws from different existing theories in order to build a new theory which fits the data, rather than beginning with just one "favorite theory" (Eliasoph & Lichterman, 1999), the way the extended case method promoted by Michael Burawoy (1998) does.

[8] We refer here to L. Boltanski's analysis: "*Desingularisation* must take place, the transformation of a dirty conflict, where the individual identity of the actor is at stake, into a clean conflict, where it is only a matter of general and impersonal categories, in order to legitimize the formulation of a claim." "We would say that a relationship is likely to be *desingularized* when each of the individuals in question can, where appropriate, be treated as a member of a category in which any other member of such category could replace them without changing the structure of the relationship" (Boltanski, 1990, pp. 286–287).

This broader definition has enabled me to make a contribution to the discussions on the role of non-profits as places of politicization. I thus demonstrated that the associative context does not necessarily constitute a place of politicization: various mechanisms, relating in particular to the kinds of action undertaken by the non-profits studied[9] and the sense of urgency experienced by volunteers, hinder the rise in generality, while others, linked to the reasons why individuals join these groups and the social connections sought within the associative framework, prevent conflict processes. I have also attempted to demonstrate under which conditions and for which membership profiles politicization processes still occur, by pointing out scissor effects: leaders of voluntary associations make the most politicized statements to those they consider most likely to absorb them, while members select the messages they absorb according to their existing receptiveness to these issues. These processes therefore have greater impact on individuals who are already engaged in the process of politicization (Hamidi, 2010).

The revised definition has also contributed to reflections on links between politicization/the rise in generality and politicization/competence, by showing that some of the mechanisms that hinder politicization processes relate to the (social) norms that govern non-profits, to group styles, as Eliasoph and Lichterman (2003) would say, and not just to the social characteristics of the actors involved, and to their possible low degree of individual political competence.

Nowadays, a number of works apply a similar definition of politicization, either by adopting these definitions explicitly or by formulating similar definitions, under which, beyond the nuances that may exist, to politicize "is to produce a publicly audible and admissible criticism or justification. It refers to argumentative processes or performances aiming to obtain the support of third parties" (Buton et al., 2016, p. 13). In works on the links between voluntary associations and public action, "politicizing" can at times refer to processes of the rise in generality (or to desingularization) and/or publicization, or to a challenge to the existing order—the dimension of conflictualization is more central in this case (Hamidi & Trenta, 2020; Sociétés contemporaines, 2020).

Blind Spots in the Definition of Politicization/the Rise in Generality: Towards a Definition of Politicization as the Identification of Common Problems Calling for a Collective Response

However, influenced by discussions with colleagues, by reflecting upon data collected in the second study (on relationships to politics in the suburbs of Lyon) and by observations I have made while researching Boston-based voluntary associations, I have become aware of blind spots in this expanded definition of politicization. This led me to reframe my former definition, following the extended case method process, upon which we draw from negative, deviant or limit cases (Ragin & Becker, 1992; Emigh, 1997) in order to reconstruct the "favorite theory" (Eliasoph & Lichterman, 1999).

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[9] Mostly small-scale, local actions.

Firstly, this definition is quite nationally focused, as already highlighted by Duchesne and Haegel (2010) in their comparative study of focus groups in Belgium (Brussels) and France (Paris). They showed that Belgian focus groups made greater use of forms of cooperation, ensuring that different opinions could be expressed and understood, while the French operated according to a logic of conflict, with certain participants dominating the situation, with a strong polarization of opinions, and a strong expressive dimension.[10] Here, the relationship to conflictuality varies according to the national context. In other cases, invoking the state as an arbitration body—to take one of the elements in the definition put forward by Jean Leca—is significantly less common. This is what I found when I conducted interviews and made observations with a number of associations in the Boston area. Although we might expect fewer references to the state in what Americans say (Lamont & Thévenot, 2010) in comparison with the French or Belgian cases, the magnitude of this difference struck me. Beyond the few references to the state, the lack of references to collectives in the USA was also impressive. For instance, in the interviews I conducted with volunteers, I asked them to draw a picture of how they would represent American society. I was struck by the frequent absence of any representation of collectives: the interviewees would often draw a series of individual figures.[11]

These very limited examples are of course not intended to serve as a detailed comparative analysis of the relationship to politics on each side of the Atlantic, but rather to highlight that the definition of politicization as a rise in generality, conflictualization, and reference to the state as an arbitration body is founded in the national (and historic) context. This is not a problem in itself, if we primarily take these definitions as points of reference, which are useful if they enable us to make observations, and if the criteria are explicit enough to enable subsequent comparisons. And this is even more the case when unexpected similarities are observed: in my dissertation, I made observations in the French sphere that were in some respects similar to those made by Eliasoph (1988) in the US context, with regard to mechanisms for avoiding politicization. Common trends do therefore also exist.

But beyond possible national specificities, this broader definition of politicization in itself raises questions. The first is the idea of the "rise in generality." This corresponds to a very abstract and theoretical conception of politics. It is precisely this kind of definition that is sometimes used to disqualify more ordinary forms of engagement or discourse, at the level of individual experiences, as feminist theorists argue. Ynestra King points out, for example, that "politics is by definition a large-scale, abstract and masculine undertaking" (King, 2016, p. 106). And in a study of grassroots environmentalist protests led by minority women in the USA, Celene Krauss shows how they are excluded by environmental movements: the former are engaged in health issues, such as toxic waste treatment plants, which are

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[10] Although they also indicate that the differences noted were not only due to the dominant national cultures, but also to the kind of topics addressed in the focus groups. These related to European issues, on which the Brussels focus groups had more knowledge, and indeed the cooperative mode, they say, requires more competence.

[11] Interviewees had the option of telling me about the drawing rather than actually draw it, if they were uncomfortable with the exercise.

disproportionately located near poor and minority neighborhoods, affecting the health and living conditions of their family and loved ones. The latter, led mainly by white male graduates, criticize them for a perspective that is too "local," not political enough, too focused on their immediate interests, and consider that these issues are not, in the strict sense, environmental. For example, the Sierra Club movement, one of the oldest environmental organizations in the USA, has refused to integrate health issues into its campaigns (Krauss, 2016). This "hierarchy of legitimacy" also explains the disqualification of NIMBY movements. We know that the ability to use abstraction, to theorize, is socially differentiated. It is therefore problematic that the definition we are adopting reproduces these selection mechanisms, and the notion of a principled superiority of something that is abstract, theoretical, and general.

More broadly, it is a definition that works well for a certain profile: left-wing people, who believe that social relationships are structured by conflict and power relations, well-versed in dealing with concepts and broad categories, comfortable with denaturalizing the social world[12] and entering into general and abstract discourse. (In other words, people who bear a strong resemblance to many social scientists!) Ultimately, such a definition means asking ourselves whether the groups we are studying think as we do—and often finding that they do not.

Therefore, I propose to widen the scope a little, in order to avoid this form of cultural ethnocentrism. However, this should be done with caution, so as to avoid broadening the concept boundlessly and losing all significance. Building here on one of the observations I made at the evangelical church I studied, I would like to explain how I propose to modify the criteria for identifying politicization.

In an interview, the Reverend Sylvia King at Tree of Life Church[13] explained her church's work to me. She told me that they do not do politics at all ("we don't get involved in political issues"), but that they can get involved "when it affects the health of the community," for example, regarding gun control. This is a prominent political issue that features heavily in American public debate, which is partly shaped by partisan opposition, etc., so it could easily be considered political in an institutional sense. But she does not qualify their work in that realm as political, nor does her response rise in generality on the question of weapons in society, nor does it generate conflict over these positions or any principle of justice on which action should be taken. Drawing on the two definitions of politicization presented above, one would consider that these words or actions are not politicized and may even show the mechanisms

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[12] This is another way to describe the processes of the rise in generality and recognition of the existence of conflicting views on a given situation.

[13] The church was founded a century ago by emigrants from Barbados, traditionally welcoming Caribbean and African American immigrants, but has begun diversifying its membership in recent years. The area in Cambridge where it is located was once an African American and socially mixed neighbourhood. Today, it has been heavily gentrified, although there are still a few longstanding working-class families, and some residents in social housing. The church operates a number of social programs (soup kitchens, clothing drives, financial assistance, etc.), and programs for the congregation (family support, budgeting workshops, etc.). It works closely with its neighboring community centre, and with the local council: the pastors meet with the mayor each month, serve as chaplains for the town, and attend local meetings on current issues. The name of the organizations and the individuals have been changed to preserve anonymity.

of political *avoidance* at work (if one considers that this action is political per se but that the reverend denies this). And yet, the church is taking action on this issue: when I conducted my research, there were two shootings in Cambridge; the mayor quickly organized public meetings in response, and the church attended. It lobbies on this issue and considers it to be something that affects the community.

Here, as well as in many other instances, an approach in terms of common problems rather than a rise in generality seems to make sense. This is the definition put forward by Jonathan White (2011)[14]: politicization occurs "when people talk about the problems they see themselves, and people like themselves, as facing." His study then aims to analyze "shared political problems which people describe themselves as facing, and the interpretative resources they use when talking about them"(White, 2011, p. X). This definition is not far removed from the reference to the rise in generality; however, talking about *common* problems sidesteps the issue that feminists have been pointing out: it is not necessarily a matter of further theorizing, but more simply of horizontally considering groups broader than oneself affected by the same problems—the community, in the case of guns mentioned above. Furthermore, there is not necessarily any reference to a sense of injustice or identification of conflict at work—which corresponds to a singular political focus—but rather a sense that there are "important common problems in need of address"(White, 2011, p. 23). From this perspective, we consider that politicization exists when problems are identified, when they are seen as common or shared, and finally when they call for a political response. This last element refers to the idea of agency evoked by Gamson (1992): the situation is not simply seen as a state of affairs, but rather a reality on which action can be taken. And the response is said to be political, in the sense that collective and not just individual solutions can be found. J. White looks at allegiances to the European Union, and his work takes place within the field of study of the political sociology of European integration; therefore, he considers institutional political solutions (White, 2011, p. 28–30). However, other forms of less institutionalized, collective response can be considered here, beyond a definition that is very much centered on the institutional political universe—such as when Reverend King evokes that of the community.

Following the extended case method process, I therefore propose a reformulation of the previous extended definition (politicization as a rise in generality and conflictualization), to consider politicization as *the identification of common problems calling for a collective response*, in order to avoid the former's excessively theoretical and agonistic focus.

A Feminist Definition: Politicization as the Ability to Open Up to Vulnerability and Be Moved

But still in some cases, I had the feeling that neither of these definitions worked, and yet something politically significant was happening. For this reason, I would like to offer a third definition of politicization, which I came up with using another

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[14] I would like to thank Sophie Duchesne for having steered me towards this work.

abductive process, drawing from other types of theories than the one previously used (Timmermans & Tivory, 2012).

Here, I will take a final example from the fieldwork I conducted in Boston. The Emmanuel Ministry Program for the homeless para-church organizes a clothing distribution once a week on its premises and weekly "outreach," whether at Boston Common or at a subway exit frequented by the homeless in Cambridge. It provides social support to those in need, as well as at annual festive events (Thanksgiving, Christmas, etc.). The organization's employees also regularly visit other places, such as homeless shelters, to organize prayer groups. In this context, I attended a homelessness awareness training session provided to volunteers involved in the program.[15]

The training began by covering the importance of having a "relational approach" and not just a "transactional approach" when providing assistance. Ruth, an employee who coordinates the program, explained that we were not just there "to help poor people," "it's not a one-way street": it's not just about providing a service, such as food or clothing, but about transforming both sides of the relationship. The goal is both to transform volunteers, by developing their sense of empathy, and to transform the homeless, by helping them get off the streets. For volunteers, the idea is not for them to put themselves in the shoes of someone who has lost a son, or who has ended up on the street, but rather to empathize with the emotion that the person they are assisting may be experiencing: the fear, the loss of confidence, etc., in order to build a bond with them. Instructors argue that only through a "one-on-one transformational relationship" can we hope to help a homeless person off the street. Jim, the employee who coordinates the soup runs and distributions, then brought up the "causes of homelessness." After this lengthy introduction to the interpersonal relations that should be established between volunteers and the homeless, I expected to explore more political factors, and I imagined a whole series of structural factors being evoked that might explain homelessness: the phenomenon of the working poor; the lack of (or low) minimum wage; the removal of social safety nets; the gentrification under way in the conurbation, etc. However, none of these aspects was addressed. The PowerPoint and Jim's presentation mentioned the "lack or loss of support systems" and the downward spiral that can be triggered when someone loses their job, home, family, etc. A little later, when discussing available solutions and, more precisely, the "institutions" that can provide assistance, the state was one of the very last to be mentioned and it was grouped together with non-profits: a whole series of religious organizations were listed—faith-based ministries/outreach workers/churches/religious groups—then the role of individuals, and only then government agencies, the government, and non-profits (presented as a single group).

The training session ran all morning, and I left struck by the failure to address institutional political issues (there was no mention of party positions on this issue, which is not necessarily surprising in a para-religious structure; however, nor was there any mention of the existing public mechanisms in place). Nor did it deal with

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[15] "Homelessness awareness training," Level 2, 28 October 2017. Three of the organization's employees, involved in the homelessness program were present: the center director, the employee in charge of soup runs, and the program manager. There were seven participants in total.

the issue in a politicized way, either by conflictualizing it or by considering issues of justice or collective causes of the problem. The two initial definitions—politicization/competence and politicization/the rise in generality—are therefore ineffective in this case. However, the definition in terms of "common problems" is equally ineffective, since the issue is approached through the lens of individual experience, both with regard to the causes of homelessness and the solutions to it. And yet, once again, it seemed that there was something political going on during this training session.

Two volunteers offered personal accounts in relation to the organizers' emphasis on the "transformative" dimension. One of them explained that she was in the habit of chatting to a homeless woman who lives near the church she attends every week. She had previously felt that this woman was being somewhat unreasonable by not wanting to take advantage of the services available to the homeless, for example, by refusing to sleep in one of the (many) shelters that operate in Boston. However, she then explained that she had then visited a women's shelter with Ruth, and when she saw the promiscuity and brutality of the place, she suddenly understood what the homeless woman had been saying: "My God, it's completely different when you really *see* the situation." The two volunteers initially felt that living on the street was somehow a choice, as if homeless people were refusing the services generously provided by the community. Before getting involved in the program,[16] many of the volunteers felt that homeless people became homeless out of convenience, because they do not have the courage to "roll up their sleeves" and work. But by chatting to people during the clothing distributions and above all during the prayer sessions,[17] they realized that becoming homeless was often linked to external events (job loss, poor treatment after accidents owing to poor healthcare provision, evictions, etc.), that the living conditions of the homeless are harsh, and that it takes a lot of energy each day to make it through the day, etc. This is not necessarily politicization in the sense of a rise in generality or a perception of a common problem: they do not necessarily link the various problems relating to poor health to debates on universal healthcare provision, or evictions to gentrification. And there is very little disagreement between them on these issues. However, their involvement has repositioned them, in the sense that it has encouraged them to consider and understand another point of view: the perspective of those who occupy other spheres of the social world.

Here, we are approaching what Tocqueville wrote in the most famous part of his analysis of the role of voluntary associations: "Feelings and opinions are recruited,

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[16] I interviewed most of the program's regular volunteers. They have three distinct profiles: people over the age of 50, primarily but not exclusively women, who have come there through their church; young people (primarily women) who are completing a year of community engagement as part of their theological training, and who participate in the activities of various entities; former homeless people (mostly men) who benefited from the entity's initiative for a time, and who want to "give back.".

[17] At the end of the clothing distribution, which is carried out on an "interpersonal basis" (each homeless person is assigned a volunteer who brings them the requested items), the volunteers suggest that the beneficiaries join in a moment of prayer. Given that the prayers of the evangelists are personalized (they do not recite a standard prayer), it serves as an opportunity to ask people how they are doing, what is on their minds at that moment in their lives, to find out more about them, and occasionally to have lengthy discussions (Luhrmann, 2012).

the heart is enlarged, and the human mind is developed by no other means than by the reciprocal influence of men upon each other. I have shown that these influences are almost null in democratic countries; they must therefore be artificially created, and this can only be accomplished by associations" (de Tocqueville, 1981 [1835–1840], volume II, part 2, chapter 5, p. 140). However, when these words are cited, the reference is usually rather ornamental and does not give rise to a specific investigation of the processes in question (except for Lichterman, 2005). Yet it would seem that this is an essential part of politicization. Here, volunteers do not undergo a rise in generality; on the contrary, it is generally by establishing an interpersonal bond with a unique person that they begin to shift their perspective. But this shift happens: it makes them aware that they share a common humanity with the people across from them and, touched by their experience, helps them realize that homeless people are not necessarily entirely responsible for their lot. One may find this a rather minimal definition of politicization, but to the extent that the discourse of individual responsibility, meritocracy, and the culture of poverty are very much ingrained in the USA and developing in continental Europe (Hochschild, 1986; Bloemraad et al., 2019), it seems that these experiences are already having a considerable effect on volunteers. It is also no coincidence that this dimension of politicization appears more clearly in religious associations, where other forms are less readily available. Nevertheless, given the importance of faith-based organizations, in the USA and elsewhere, this aspect seems important to take into consideration. Furthermore, this dimension of politicization is not unique to religion-based forms of participation. In this special issue, Pierre Monforte identifies similar transformative processes among volunteers supporting refugees in Europe: most view their actions as pragmatic, neutral, and compassionate at first, then encounter moral dilemmas that transform their understanding of their action in a more politicized way (Monforte, 2021). Finally, in a context in which the polarization of political life but also differences in life experiences are increasing, with growing social segregation, these interpersonal encounters and shifts in perspective seem to be of considerable political importance.

These two observations prompt me to emphasize the ability to broaden one's horizons, to shift one's gaze: the term "[to be] moved," used by one the volunteers mentioned above, refers both to the physical and the emotional shift implied by such movement. In addition to the Tocquevillian term reworked by Paul Lichterman, this refers to the shift in the definition of power proposed by feminist theorists: politicization as the capacity to open up to another person's viewpoint and to admit one's vulnerability.[18] Joanna Macy points out that:

> power became identified with domination. … More often than not it is still defined as exerting your will upon other people: 'power' means 'power over.' In such a view, power is a zero-sum game: 'The more you have, the less I have,' or 'If you win, I lose.' It fosters the notion, furthermore, that power involves invulnerability. To be strong, to keep from being pushed around, defenses, armor, and rigidity are needed in order not to let oneself be influ-

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[18] Also in keeping with the analysis developed in the notion of care (Tronto, 1993).

enced or changed. From the systems perspective, this patriarchal notion of power is both inaccurate and dysfunctional. That is because life processes are intrinsically self-organizing. Power, then, … is the ability to effect change …. Here power, far from being identified with invulnerability, requires just the opposite – openness, vulnerability, and readiness to change. (Macy, 2016, p. 177) .

Although Macy's analysis relates to power, I propose applying it to politicization, defined as *the capacity to consider other narratives, other ways of seeing the world, and being willing to be transformed by other people's points of view.*[19]

Conclusion

I propose a combination of these three definitions of politicization: (i) the legitimist or realist concept based on the relationship to the institutional political sphere, which is socially determined according to factors now widely known, and which is prominent among Bourdieusian scientists; (ii) politicization as the identification of shared problems calling for collective solutions, which is a reworked definition of the conflictualization and "rise in generality" approach used previously, but avoiding its highly theoretical and agonistic prism; and finally (iii) politicization as the readiness to be moved, to consider other points of view than those initially adopted.

An objection can no doubt be made to this proposal. It can be said that definitions of this kind go beyond the scope of social science, and that this is a bold step into the realm of philosophy given that we are adopting substantial concepts of politicization (Buton et al., 2016, p. 13).[20] But as soon as neither (i) political labelling by the actors, nor (ii) the relationship with categories socially constructed as political applies, for the reasons mentioned above, such an approach becomes necessary, including among researchers who claim to refuse any a priori definition of politics or politicization. Whether we consider the rise in generality, conversations driven by public spirit (Eliasoph, 1988), curiosity beyond one's comfort zone (Boudreau, 2017, p. 79), the transformation of individual subjectivities (Boudreau, this issue) or even, in keeping with Pierre Bourdieu's tradition, as Daniel Gaxie proposes, "judgements based on valuations that function as instruments for ordering, classifying, and evaluating social and political realities in a given context" (Gaxie, 1993, p. 169), we are effectively engaging a concept of what politicization means. I propose making this more explicit in order to be able to discuss collectively the definitions we adopt.

In this paper, I propose some elucidations of the use of the concept of politicization. It falls within a pragmatic tradition—one exposed in this vivid analogy drawn

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[19] This conception echoes what Duchesne and Haegel (2010) identify as a collaborative form of politicization. But they are more interested in the discursive dynamics of political discussions than I am here, since I am drawing from observations, and their definition associates this cooperative model with a consensual conception of democracy and politicization, which is not embedded in my own definition.

[20] This is also the objection made by Jacques Lagroye in reaction to the article I wrote in 2006 on these issues (personal communication).

by John Dewey: "Different ways of behaving, in spite of their endless diversity, may be classed together in view of common relationships to an end. … Cherry trees will be differently grouped by woodworkers, orchardists, artists, scientists and merrymakers. To the execution of different purposes different ways of acting and reacting on part of the trees are important. Each classification may be equally sound when the difference of ends is borne in mind" (Dewey, 1953, pp. 126–127).[21] It is thus necessary to clarify and explain the focus on a given dimension, how it will allow the object to speak for itself and what end is pursued. This is what I hope I have done here.

In this case, the two broadened definitions I am proposing also correspond to political considerations: rather than studying their level of institutional competence, I am more interested in knowing whether people are happy with the situation as it stands, whether they would like to see social change and through what moves this could be achieved, in keeping with the focus on lifestyle politics and informal forms of politicization analyzed in this special issue.

I am hoping it can also help to delineate renewed avenues of research. For instance, the relationship between education and income levels is much less clear in the two enlarged definitions of politicization than it is when one studies the relationship to the institutional political sphere. Furthermore, the various forms of politicization do not necessarily go hand in hand. In her study, Diana Mutz points out that discussing politics (in the institutional sense) does not follow the same social logic as being exposed to conflicting points of view. The number of adversarial discussions therefore decreases as income and education levels rise, while the likelihood of policy discussions increases. Talking a lot about politics, and talking politics with people who do not share our opinions, are two different things: as you become more interested in politics, you tend to discuss it more with like-minded people (Mutz, 2006, p. 31). Here, we see why it is worth making a distinction between different types of process, which are forms of politicization, but with very different social impacts.

Moreover, combining a definition in terms of institutional politicization and an enlarged definition shows that most individuals, including those who are not politicized in the institutional sense, feel that there are shared problems that call for collective solutions in society. This result seems important because it helps to identify the seeds of dissatisfaction that are not discernible through an institutional definition. We can also show how mechanisms hinder this broader politicization, such as the importance of meritocratic discourse in France, or the naturalization of realities, which make it difficult to think of situations as *problems* and *collective problems*, and which make it difficult to imagine collective solutions, whether enacted by the state or by mobilizations (Hamidi, 2021). By saying this, we show that the difficulty in politicizing is not only due to a lack of individual resources, and to a weakness of cultural capital in particular, but that it is also largely due to the effects of the political offer, the weakness of the discourses that would articulate the lived experience of

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[21] I would like to thank Nina Eliasoph for bringing this text to my attention, and for our lengthy and joyful discussions on the matter of politicization.

injustices or inequalities, and the devaluation of collective mobilizations to weigh on the institutional political game, etc. This makes it possible to link the study of individual (de)politicization to the study of depoliticization produced by political supply and public policy (Hay, 2007). These elements could help inform the study of mobilizations such as the "*gilets jaunes*" in France, and the forms they have taken, for instance.

Declarations

Informed Consent The participants were informed of the research and had the opportunity to accept or deny the interviews.

Research Involving Human Participants and/or Animals Yes, involving human participants.

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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