Abstract: Geoffrey PLEYERS

Contesting or complementing representative democracy?
Experiments and tensions in the alterglobalization movement

Drawing on empirical research on the alter-globalization movement conducted between 1999 and 2010, this paper will analyze the forms of emerging forms of global citizenship that are at the core of the two main trends of the movement.

On one side, actors of the “way of reason” seek to combine a legitimacy based on the quality of arguments (Habermas) with the promotion of active citizenship. It results in a structural tension between the necessary delegation to experts and the promotion of citizens participation. On the other side, activists of the « way of subjectivity » focus on “lived experience”. Contrarily to expertise, lived experience can’t be delegated (McDonald, 2006). Activists have thus experimented forms of direct democracy. While often innovative, they nevertheless face important limits. Both of these trends develop important mechanisms of a counterdemocracy (Rosanvallon).

While many activists develop their culture of politics in opposition to representative democracy, this paper will conceptualize forms of legitimacy based on representation, arguments and direct participation as complementary. Taken together, they offer concrete ways forward for a multi-dimensional approach to a complex and multi-level democratic system.

Geoffrey Pleyers, FNRS-UC Louvain & CADIS-EHESS
Geoffrey.Pleyers@uclouvain.be