Many mobilizations not only contest reforms decided by representatives, they also organize in forms that seem alternative to representative democracy. That is the case in French student movements. Since at least the sixties, they use the form of “assemblée générale” (general assembly) as one of the main place where discussions et decisions about the mobilization take place. Assemblées générales (AG) are a direct democracy procedure, since any student is allowed to participate in their debates and votes, and since the attendees consider themselves legitimate to take decisions by the sole virtue of their gathering. They were used again during the French student mobilizations of the end of the 2000s. Such contentious practices may be interpreted as a symptom of distrust of representative institutions, desire for change in democracy, or exploration of new forms of political organization, especially given the fact that they involve young people, usually diagnosed as little interested in institutional politics and eager for novelty.

Actually, alternative forms of organization in social movements are often mentioned as a sign of a crisis of representation (Sintomer 2011: 32-38) in the last decades, and as regards contention and activism, of a rejection of hierarchical relations and delegation, associated with new forms of involvement in collective action (Ion 1997: 67-77, Ion, Franguiadakis, Viot 2005: 48-70, Jeanneau, Lernould 2008: 197-209). However, practices and conceptions of democracy have rarely been studied for themselves. When they are, empirical evidence allows to question or qualify these two assumptions: the novelty of alternative forms of organization, and their connection with a consensual rejection of representation. They were used throughout the 20th century at least (Polletta 2002). It is not possible to connect them with a global crisis of representation, in particular by unions (Abdelnour et al. 2009). Donatella della Porta conducted with other scholars a vast research about democracy in the global justice movement, which showed the heterogeneity of conceptions and practices among its participants and organizations, according to the level of participation or delegation they promoted (della Porta 2009a, 2009b). It also revealed that activists both mobilize old models of democracy and adapt them. However, the organizations’ “age” do influence their visions and practices, since older ones use less often consensus and horizontal forms of participation than more recent ones (Combes, Haeringer, Sommier 2009).

Linking participatory forms of organization in social movements to dissatisfaction with representative democracy implies a hypothesis which has to be confirmed: activists would resort to them for ideological motives. As a matter of fact, research on organizational forms in social
movements has often been based on an opposition between ideology and strategy. Participatory forms would be used for ideological, cultural or identity reasons, when more hierarchical and delegative ones would be preferred after strategic or instrumental considerations (Gordon, Babchuk 1959, Curtis, Zurcher 1974, Downey 1986, Mouchard 2002). Then, the use of participatory devices would be prefigurative of the type of democracy they want and claim (Breines 1980). Recently, some scholars have linked the use of alternative forms of organization to the adoption and adaptation of the emergent norms of deliberative democracy (della Porta 2005). They did so by comparing the values promoted in social movements with them, but they more rarely identified the channels through which they would have diffused in social movements, as Heloïse Nez did about the Indignados in Spain, using democratic tools partly inspired by professionals of institutional participatory devices (Nez 2012).

The opposition between strategy and ideology is deceptive insofar as activists and organizations may develop and mobilize norms which fit in their interests and tend to justify their strategical orientations by ideological assertions. Conversely, the perception of appropriate means and goals is shaped by cultural representations. Hence, strategy and ideology tend to go together and vary both according to the social position of those who promote them. Francesca Polletta, in her research about democracy in American social movements (Polletta 2002), pointed out this bias, and also found strategic benefits activists attributed to participatory forms of organization. She also identified the social experiences (religious fellowship or friendship for instance) participants relied on to build their concrete practices of democracy. The research conducted by Donatella della Porta on the global justice movement also intends to explain the various practices and conceptions of democracy in it through a complex set of variables, including the social properties of participants, the characteristics of the organizations involved and ideological views on representation and democracy (della Porta 2009a, 2009b).

Similarly, our study aim at mapping out the normative approaches conveyed in AG during the French student mobilizations of the end of the 2000s. We will try to identify from what references and experiences students draw their perception schemes about democracy. In order to understand the shaping of their diverse approaches, we will focus on the processes through which norms are diffused in AG, the connection between the various values students promote and their position in the conflicts and competition among participants, and the kind of political socialization they had. In the extent of this study, we will not be able to interrogate also the links between their conceptions and practices and their social properties. Its contribution lies rather in the light it casts on the ways “ordinary” citizens perceive representation and democracy. Indeed, investigations like Donatella della Porta's one tend to focus on arenas like social forums where we find mostly
participants with an extended experience in activism (della Porta 2009b: 16). On the contrary, a lot of students without such background come to AG, and yet constantly argue in them about matters of democracy. Then, AG are places where ordinary approaches to this issues can be captured in context, among people who show a minimal interest in them.

What are the social and political matrices where participants' conceptions and practices come from, and do they have anything to do with a questioning of the representative system? Do all participants consider that AG are democratic, and more democratic than representative institutions? Which ones do and which ones don't? What kind of procedures do they blame concerning representation, and which ones do they promote or try out instead? Based on an ethnographic investigation about AG in three higher education establishments during the last four student movements which happened in France (see the box below), our results will highlight three main points. First, students in AG disagree about what is or is not democratic, they do not all attend AG for ideological reasons and do not all attribute to them a democratic value. Then, the approaches expressed in AG are far from confirming a generalized critical assessment toward representation. On the contrary, students are mostly familiar with representation, and electoral institutions are the main matrix from where they draw their conceptions and practices. Last, a prefigurative use of AG as a way to contest representative institutions and promote alternative forms of democracy concerns a very few number of students, characterized by their experience of activism, which has put them in contact with old contentious visions and practices of democracy. Consequently, the norms they promote are far from being new. We will first stress the circulations of norms and procedures from the polling station to the AG, then expose the democratic approaches of members of the main student union in France, the Union nationale des étudiants de France (Unef), and eventually identify the approaches promoted by the actual partisans of alternative forms of democracy. This mapping will allow us to present in conclusion the main principles of distribution of the normative approaches mobilized in AG.
This study is based on an ethnographic investigation about AG in French student movements from 2006 to 2010, an intense period with a national mobilization each year or every two years. In the winter and spring of 2006, students opposed the governmental project of creating a labor contract specific to young people – the Contract première embauche (CPE), which was abolished in April. In the summer of 2007, one of the first reforms made during Nicolas Sarkozy's presidency was a overhaul of higher education, through the loi relative aux Responsabilités et Libertés des universités (LRU). It made the universities “autonomous” in the management of their material and human resources. Students contested the reform in the autumn and winter of 2007, and once again in the winter and spring of 2009, as higher education employees went on strike against some decrees enforcing the law. Finally, students joined the inter-professional movement against the retirement reform of 2010, in the autumn.

I studied the AG of these four movements in three establishments: Censier, the main campus of the University Paris 3, the Pierre Mendès France (PMF) center, a campus for first and second year students at the University Paris 1, and the University of Poitiers, a town of 130 000 inhabitants. These three establishments were chosen for the variety of the presence of student unions and political organizations among them. The main French student unions and youth organizations are active at the PMF center, whereas at Censier the left-wing majority of Unif is hegemonic. As to the University of Poitiers, it is known for the weak presence of organizations. I conducted in-depth interviews with sixty participants in these AG and with students from other establishments, and collected as much information as I could through informal talks, mailing lists, websites, leaflets, and public or internal texts produced by political youth organizations and student unions. I was able to observe the mobilizations of 2009 and 2010 at Censier, and of 2010 at the PMF center. As I privileged long-term immersion into the field in order to study the mobilized group including outside AG, I could not go to Poitiers during these movements and only directly observed the Parisian AG. In order to seize diverse scenes and to control the possible biases of my observer position in each field, I chose to vary it on the two Parisian sites. I practiced non-participant observation at Censier, and participant observation at the PMF center. I continued to observe and mix with student activists between mobilizations, as a member of a student union from 2006 to 2012.

Ethnography allows to capture the devices and norms actors use in practice. It permits to bypass some of the difficulties Social Sciences usually face when they try to apprehend values: access only to practices, objects and discourse and not to what actors believe, and risk that discourse would be only façades, masking the real stakes of what actors do. Indeed, we can assume that chances are lower to deal with such façades when we grasp, instead of official discourse, those which actors make in the heat of action, in context, confronted to concrete dilemmas, or what they do at the moment. Consequently, we did not rely first and foremost on written sources, but on observed practices and interventions of students in AG, and on the stand they took in different conflicts. In interviews and informal discussions, we paid less attention to the expression of general opinions of democracy, than to tales and anecdotes about AG (Beaud 1996: 241-243). Norms we can identify this way do not constitute absolutely coherent theoretical systems. That is why we refer to them as “approaches”, a term used by Anne Paillet in her research on ethical norms in neonatal intensive care units to describe assemblages of conceptions through which actors apprehend practical cases and dilemmas, and which they express in situation (Paillet 2007).

I. From the polling station to the AG

Students may be up to thousands to attend assemblées générales during French student movements. But they do not agree about what is democratic or not, and about the relation between what they do and representative institutions. First of all, every participant is not involved in the

1 Some materials of this investigation are drawn from my theses for the Master first and second year, which dealt partly with other establishments (Le Mazier 2007, 2009).
debates about democracy in AG. In interviews, some of them did not express a fixed opinion about the norms and procedures which were used in them. A first result is then that having views on democracy in AG is a specific competence which requires practical interests in the conflicts it generates. When students express opinions of AG, the most striking fact is the weight of approaches inspired by representative institutions.

One group in particular manifests by uproar or explicit discourse that it takes part in debates and votes without considering that they have any democratic legitimacy. It is made of the opponents of the blockade of the university (*blocage*), the favorite way of action of the French student movements at the end of the 2000s. It consists in picket lines and barricades of tables and chairs in front of the classrooms, which enforce the student strike, preventing courses to take place. Also called *anti-blocage* students, they stand up for a continuum of positions, which go from explicit support to the reforms that the mobilization contests to the mere contestation of its contentious repertoire, even if they support its claims. They include members of right-wing unions or parties, for instance members of the UMP, at the government during this period, or of the Union nationale inter-universitaire (Uni), or the Mouvement des Étudiants (Met) which replaced it in 2009. But they are also composed of students who are not card-carrying, or who are members of apolitical student associations. They come to AG in order to be informed about the decisions about blockade, and to protest and vote against it.

The conflicts which oppose them to the AG organizers crystallize around several controversies. Is it legitimate to contest reforms decided by authorized representatives (members of Parliament or government)? Are AG a decision making tool democratic enough, in particular to organize a blockade of the university? To answer these questions, *anti-blocage* students mobilize norms in favor of representative government against the practice of AG. For instance, at the PMF center, on November 2nd, 2010, *anti-blocage* students opposed the legitimacy of the retirement reform, since it was proposed by the government and approved a few days before by the Parliament, to the illegitimacy of the blockade, decided by undemocratic AG:

“Democracy, it is every one being able to vote every five years for people who make reforms. Here, it is not democracy. We are a thousand out of the several thousands of students who are at Paris 1, it is not representative, and the votes are not seriously counted.”

This recurrent argument questions AG through a comparison with representative institutions. Official votes are perceived as open to the whole concerned population, which can participate at minimal cost, only by putting a ballot paper in a box. On the contrary, in AG, only the opinions of those who participate in the often long and laborious deliberation are taken into account. Ballot

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2 Field notes. Intervention of an *anti-blocage* student during this AG.
boxes, moreover, allow a strict counting of the results, unlike vote by a show of hands, in force in most AG. Then, the latter are not “representative” enough to be legitimate. Consecutively, anti-blocage students often ask for secret votes, with ballot boxes, in order to make decisions about the blockade. They obtain it in Poitiers on March 2nd, 2006, but the blockade is still approved, and several times the same year in another center of the University Paris 1 where Law students attend their courses. They also try to modify the order of debates and votes, which happened at the PMF center on November 2nd, 2010. Thus, anyone can vote, including those who do not want to participate in debates. That is the argument of an anti-blocage student at the PMF center on October 22nd, 2010:

“You know why they absolutely want to have their debates? Because they are motivated to discuss during hours, and they wait for us to leave before they vote about the blockade.”

Hence, two conceptions of democracy are opposed. The students who organize AG want debates to precede votes, and promote a deliberative conception of democracy, where opinion is built through public exchange of arguments. The anti-blocage students, on the contrary, consider that each voter must be able to make a decision in an autonomous and isolated way, without necessarily attending the debates. The first ones see voting as a collective practice, in which the group manifests itself by the unanimity of those who raise their hand. The second ones consider it as an individual act consisting in producing an opinion free of any pressure. We can easily recognize in the arguments of the latter the norms conveyed by the “electoral civilization” (Déloye 2003: 79-104) which has imposed in France since the 19th century. Indeed, scholars have showed how electoral norms and devices were progressively implemented and learned by French voters, and built the figure of an autonomous citizen free to formulate an individualized opinion (Garrigou 2002, Déloye, Ihl 2008), figure which is materialized and symbolized in particular by the recourse to polling booths (Garrigou 1988).

Then, we could think that this cleavage opposes partisans of AG, promoters of alternative forms of democracy, to defenders of approaches inspired by electoral institutions. However, both of them may come to evaluate AG after norms drawn for the latter. Indeed, those in favor of the actual functioning of AG stress the fact that those who decide should be previously informed, an approach they may justify explicitly by references to the ideal of the enlightened citizen conveyed by electoral institutions. In Poitiers in 2006, students voted after the AG at tables. But only the ones who had attended the AG had access to them. Ulysse, then a second year student in Literature, an associative activist and one of the main organizer of the strike, made these answers to my questions:

“Why did it matter that people have listened to the debate before voting? Why was an AG better than

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3 Field notes. Intervention of an anti-blocage student during this AG.
secret votes without debate?
− Well, it's obvious, I mean... Maybe it seems obvious to me but...
− You know, during presidential elections, there is no debate in AG before.
− No. But there is a debate... through the media. Well, it's the same idea. I mean... we worked on
the principle: OK to make people vote, but on something about what they are informed."

He thus made an analogy between the situation during official votes, the debates in AG replacing the media work in electoral times. In his view, there is no discontinuity between deliberation in AG and electoral institutions, both relying on the ideal of the enlightened citizen conveyed by the latter, which is “obvious” because it is familiar. Other practices used by organizers of AG imitate electoral operations. In some universities, opponents are accepted at the platform where a few students moderate the debates and organize the votes, as at Censier in 2007. We already saw that in Poitiers in 2006, students expressed their opinion at vote tables where they had to show their student card. In these cases, pluralism is respected and every camp may address to voters; representatives of each camp control the voting process; or participants vote individually and not collectively by a show of hands.

It is then representation which is familiar, not alternative types of democracy, and there is a strong circulation of practices from the polling station to the AG. Such references are not surprising among anti-blocage students. Opposing the blockade, they have an interest in discrediting the decision place of this way of action, and find in representative institutions a repertoire of arguments and practices for this purpose. But the recourse to such norms and devices is not only strategic. If both promoters and opponents of AG may mobilize them, we may assume that they remain structuring for all of them as soon as matters of democracy and legitimacy are at stake. Therefore, participation in direct democracy assemblies does not mechanically imply distrust of representative institutions. Detecting too quickly symptoms of a crisis of representation means neglecting the force of inertia of the latter, a long-term established social construction, which comes first in the political socialization of individuals. At the same time, in the AG of Poitiers in 2006, and of Censier in 2007, activists did reaffirm that AG where organized by and for the movement. For instance, anti-blocage students were not admitted at the presidency of the platform, or in the mobilization committee, which enforced the decisions made in AG. Hence, there is a constant tension in them between the ambition, strongly inspired by the universalism of representative institutions, to make all the students of an establishment debate together, and the objective of the organization of a more limited collective, the one of those who are committed to the movement. Then, the practices in AG and their justifications appear as an approximate assembling borrowing norms and devices, not without contradiction, from both representative institutions and more contentious values.

Some students may also refer to the content of their courses to justify their normative approaches. Victor, an anti-blocage student who participated in the AG of 2010 at the PMF center, then a second year student in a Bachelor's Degree in History and Archeology, a selective program, criticized the debates in AG which he found pretty poor. He mentioned his studies in History to compare them with idealized political examples from the past: Ancient Greece and Rome, the French revolution, and the republicans of the 19th and 20th centuries. In 2006, Law students at the University Paris 1 used in their center secret votes with ballot boxes, signing by voters on electoral lists and verification of student cards, and the control of the counting of the votes by the different camps. A women who were during the movement a first year student explained:

“Law school made us tend to respect what we had learned and to put it into practice... well, the French institutional model which we had largely studied during the first two years.”

However, we may question this link between course and normative approaches. Law students learn constitutional Law, but not the practical organization of votes; students in History do not learn that human affairs are led through a rational exchange of arguments between prestigious orators. What is at stake in the construction of these students' views about AG is rather their relation to their studies and their perception of the attitudes expected from a student in such or such subject. Law students act as guarantors for the appearance of legality of the votes in AG. As to Victor, his interest in politics is one among other elements of distinction of a student in a selective formation who values disinterested taste for argumentation, rhetoric and culture, which to him should impregnate argumentation in AG.

Eventually, if pro- and anti-blocage students may both rely on references to electoral institutions, however, they disagree about the meaning of the comparison, and the way it legitimates or discredits the democratic value of AG. For anti-blocage students, participation in AG is only instrumental: they aim at influencing decisions which have no weight for them, but which will be efficient for others who will justify their action this way.

II. Unef “majo” and majority rule

Unlike anti-blocage students, activists from Unef are partisans of AG. The student union belongs to those who call for AG at the beginning of a movement, and who mobilize their resources to attract in them a numerous audience. However, members of the majority faction of the union, colloquially called “majo”, promote AG not because they attribute to them a democratic value, but

5 Interview, September 20th, 2011.
6 Interview, April 9th, 2007.
because they find them useful during a mobilization. The general secretary (number two of the union) of Unef, in charge of the section of the University Paris 1 during the mobilization of 2010 explained in this way the role of AG:

“There is no movement without AG. And you don't lead a movement if you don't lead the AG, and you don't convince the students if you aren't in the AG, and if you don't manage to convince them. As a matter of fact, the guys who will go and demonstrate, and the guys who take action, that's the ones who come to the AG. Not all of them, but the majority. Then, AG are determinant, yeah.”

In her view, AG are first and foremost a forum in order to convince a numerous and mobilizable audience of the positions of Unef. That is why activists from the “majo” take part in the AG and make speeches. However, they barely make propositions for votes. Their indifference, and even their reluctance toward decision making through vote in AG appeared in an episode of the AG of October 12th, 2010, at the PMF center:

The AG happens before a demonstration. Students from another university in the neighborhood are supposed to join the Paris 1 students at the PMF center to go together to demonstrate. They arrive at 1:00 pm, when the AG is not achieved. In particular, the votes have not been made. As I am at the platform, an activist from Unef asks to be allowed to speak. She proposes putting immediately an end to the AG to go to demonstrate. I make people vote on this proposition, and it is rejected. Several students go out of the amphitheater in order to prevent the students from the other university from invading our AG and forcing us to go to demonstrate. As the debates goes on in the AG, the president of Unef at Paris 1 asks again if we can put an end to the AG. I refuse, referring to the vote that has just happened. He gets mad and tells me: “You want to be minority all your life long?”. He goes out of the amphitheater and comes back with a megaphone, in order to call students to go out and demonstrate. Another activist, member of a left-wing minority faction of Unef, rushes at him and prevents him from using it. A general fight follows, with several minutes of screaming from all sides of the amphitheater.

Thus, in “majo” activists' view, what matters in AG are speeches and interventions, on the pattern of rallies, not decisions and votes. The president of Unef at Paris 1 did not hesitate to question the AG's vote about the moment of departure to the demonstration. He even considered as “minority” the decision made by a majority of participants. Hence, the legitimacy of a decision comes from its “majority” character, but not according to the majority of AG. This position can be interpreted in relation to the discourse of the President of Unef at the École normale supérieure (ENS) of Paris in 2009: “in the movement, our compass is the mass of students”, that is, including the mass of those who do not come to AG but whom Unef claims to represent as the majority union in the student elections and in terms of the number of adherents. If AG make decisions which are divergent with those of Unef, the latter remain the most legitimate, because it has been settled as majority within the context of the representative institutions of the student world. In “majo” activists' view, the criterion to determine the legitimacy of a decision is majority rule, omnipresent

7 Interview, May 18th, 2011.
8 Field notes.
9 Interview, May 5th, 2009.
in their discourse, and which can be more clearly established in elections and the number of adherents than in AG. A big level of participation in AG, as in demonstrations, matters, as a criterion of a successful movement, but simply because it contributes to the effect of number which legitimates a mobilization.

We can easily understand why “majo” activists associate legitimacy with the criterion of majority rule. This normative approach fits in their interests: their hegemony in the student world is much more clear after the barometer of the elections and the number of adherents than after their weight in AG. There, the votes not always correspond to their position and a lot of students express distrust of organizations. “Majo” activists are disposed to develop and learn the normative approaches which legitimate the most their faction and organization. Consequently, as among a lot of non-affiliated students, representation is a strong reference among them. Nevertheless, the matrix of their views lies in student representative institutions, whereas the former's one is rather linked to the political elections. As *anti-blocage* students' ones, the normative approaches expressed about AG by “majo” activists may be described as instrumental, in the sense of the instrumental rationality distinguished by Max Weber from value-rationality (Weber 1978 [1921]: 24-26). Participation in AG is a means for the attainment of ends, which diverge from the mobilization's one for the former, and converge for the latter. On the contrary, among other students, the organization of AG corresponds to a democratic requirement, and they justify their participation after value-rationality. These students do not only promote AG according to goals, but for the sake of democratic values, which legitimate AG as such. As we saw, it does not mean that *anti-blocage* students and “majo” activists have only strategic considerations and do not have any view on democracy – then only associate democracy with representation, and then do not consider AG as a place for democracy. It does mean either that promoters of AG after value-rationality would be more disinterested. They also have interests in participating in AG, in influencing the decisions and in using them as a forum to convince. Nevertheless, they also find an interest in affirming their intrinsic value, whereas “majo” activists and opponents of AG claim their instrumental relation to this form of organization.

III. Value justifications of AG

The partisans of AG who attribute to them a democratic value may be suspicious of attempts by representative organizations to speak for the movement and, as a rule, might reject mechanisms of delegation. In Poitiers in 2006, political activists and unionists were not allowed to explicitly refer to this membership in AG. Mobilized students did not want to be associated with political and
union labels. Conversely but, paradoxically for the same purpose, affiliated activists at Censier and at the PMF center had to mention their political or union identity, in order to make obvious any attempt by an organization to control the mobilization. The rotation of tasks principle is often applied to the members of the platform and to the delegations to the national or regional coordinations which gather each week members of local AG.

Some students do promote AG as a more legitimate form of organization than existing representative institutions. They are often activists who position themselves at the left of Unef “majo”, either members of its left-wing minority the Tendance pour une Unef unitaire et démocratique (Tuud), or members of other unions – the Fédération syndicale étudiante (FSE), Sud-Étudiant, the Confédération nationale du Travail (CNT) – or non-affiliated students. They sometimes belong to political organizations of the far left. For these activists who promote a rupture with the existing social and political institutions, AG during mobilizations may be prefigurative of the type of society they claim. A student who took action against CPE at ENS in 2006, member of Sud-Étudiant and of Alternative libertaire (AL), a far left organization, related his practice of AG to a “project of society” based on “autogestion” and “direct democracy”, and in his view, AG during movements allow participants “to realize that, yes, indeed, direct democracy do work”\textsuperscript{10}.

However, these students do not agree either about what is or should be democracy in AG. They associate it with diverse watchwords: “direct democracy”, “labor democracy”, “auto-organization” or “autogestion”. They confront each other in particular about the level of acceptable delegation. They reactivate a debate, traditional since the French Revolution (Zaidman 2008), about the mandate of the delegates to coordinations. Some students are in favor of imperative mandate, a classical direct democracy tool after which the delegates must strictly follow the decisions of the group who designated them; others promote free mandate, or “semi-imperative” mandate, which consists in a compromise between the two previous types. For instance, activists from the Ligue communiste révolutionnaire (LCR) and the Jeunesses communistes révolutionnaires (JCR), its youth branch, which created in 2009 the Nouveau Parti anticapitaliste (NPA), defend the last two forms of mandates. They promote a delegative conception of democracy, but in which representatives should be chosen by the base of AG. In 2010, during the mobilization against the retirement reform, the youth branch of the organization, the NPA Jeunes, published four special issues of its newspaper, \textit{L’Étincelle anticapitaliste}. Each one included arguments about the organization of the movement, close to those the members of the organization used in AG. They promoted AG and coordinations, with the slogan of “auto-organization”. But this approach was not at all incompatible with a high level of delegation. The issue number 2 thus comprised an article

\textsuperscript{10} Interview, March 27\textsuperscript{th}, 2007.
entitled: “Having directions, is it contradictory with auto-organization?” The answer was clearly “no”. They opposed imperative mandate for delegates in coordinations: if the latter should be possibly “revoked”, they should nevertheless constitute “a true alternative to union directions”. Indeed, in the NPA Jeunes, orthodox trotskysts are majority, and diffuse to its members, through a dense political formation, normative approaches which combine anti-Stalinist ideals of democracy with the Leninist claim for a revolutionary avant-garde leading the mobilizations.

Among these activists, often card-carrying, the use of these references is not cosmetic or simply based on a general political culture. They belong to organizations where this set of labels is transmitted. They have learned from other and older activists normative principles, such as the sovereignty of AG during strikes. The form of organization in AG itself have been used in the French labor movement since the first strikes at the beginning of the 19th century (Aguet 1954, Sirot 2002, 2011). Some organizations played the role of abeyance structures (Taylor 1989), that is, structures maintaining memory among groups of activists during periods of low intensity in social movements. That is the case of LCR, active in the 1970s and which survived to the period of reflux of social movements in the 1980s. Some activists also maintained these normative approaches active in the libertarian and anarchist networks, in particular in the Organisation révolutionnaire anarchiste (ORA), then in the Union des travailleurs communistes libertaires (UTCL) and eventually in AL (Rival 2013). The idea and practices of autogestion where principally promoted in the union field by the Confédération française démocratique du travail (CFDT). When they became less and less central in its principles during the 1980s, some activists continued to promote them and eventually created new unions with the label Sud (Solidaires, unitaires et démocratiques) at the end of the decade (Denis 2001). Student activists of the end of the 2000s, such as members of Sud-Étudiant, which belonged to the same inter-professional structure than the latter, Solidaires, of the LCR, then of the NPA, or of AL, had become acquainted with these references. They had access to an internal literature developing them. Some of them had also had the opportunity of mixing and debating with other activists, building bridges between these different periods of social movements.

Activists who value AG for democratic reasons then mobilize old contentious references. In their competition with Unef “majo”, as members of minority factions or organizations, that is, as outsiders, they are disposed to contest the current modes of representation and to support alternative forms of democracy. However, they are not unanimously opposed to delegation as such. Some of them are partisans of direct democracy or imperative mandate, whereas others just want representatives to be elected and revocable by the base of AG.
IV. Conclusions

AG in French student movements of the end of the 2000s are the product of a miscellaneous combination of norms and procedures, stemmed from heterogeneous matrices. We will try here to classify the various approaches we identified according to their main principles of opposition. We were able to distinguish participants who make instrumental use of AG (anti-blocage students, “majo” activists) to others who promote value justifications of them. But the mapping of approaches we made allows to outline another differentiation criterion. On the one hand, we met often card-carrying activists, with large knowledge and skills about organizational forms, who had learned how to handle norms and references which fitted in their position in their competition with other groups, and which may diverge from the values conveyed by political representative institutions. On the other hand, among pro- or anti-blocage students who were not experienced activists, a lot of students evaluated and practiced AG after their experience of electoral operations. Then, normative approaches in AG are distributed according to another principle. This one distinguishes actors according to their level of experience in activism and, consequently, their ability to mobilize other normative references than the familiar ones inspired by representative government. The figure below shows the distribution of the different groups' approaches according to these two principles.

Ellipses represent the different groups, and may intersect insofar as participants can belong to several categories. The horizontal axis opposes them according to their instrumental use or value justification of AG. The vertical axis locates them between two poles, according to the level of experience in activism of their members, notably objectified through their adherence to a political current and/or an union. The more the groups are positioned at the bottom of the figure, the bigger their chances are to mobilize normative approaches which borrow from electoral and representative institutions – to either justify or denounce the organization of AG. The more they are located at the top, the more they are likely to handle alternative ways of justification of their practices.
If we combine these two principles of distribution of normative approaches in AG, we can stress several results. First, if organizations' “age” has proved to be an important factor in order to explain their relation to alternative forms of democracy (Combes, Haeringer, Sommier 2009), we observe that what we might call the activist “age” of individuals, that is, their level of experience in activism, also matters. Representative institutions come first in the political socialization. They seem natural and obvious to a lot of students. A secondary socialization is required in order to learn how to handle alternative norms and to find them suited to collective action. Then, we see that groups who do associate their practice of AG with a global rejection of representative institutions are far from being majority: they are confined to the extreme East at the top of the figure. Some groups at the east top of the figure, like JCR then NPA Jeunes, only contest some forms of representation. Last, we showed that these groups do not mobilize new norms, but borrow them
from old contentious conceptions of democracy. Consequently, student participation in AG should not be analyzed as a symptom either of new trends in collective action or of an unequivocal crisis of representation.

References


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