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## Creating space for agonism: making room for subalternised voices in peace research

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### ABSTRACT

How can researchers do more than 'do no harm' and have a positive impact in the contexts in which they intervene? These are classic questions of PAR, which also apply to peace research. How can research practice contribute to peace? There is an intimate relationship between power, violence and silence. Hence, working with subalternised voices, subject to epistemic violence, poses a methodological challenge for social sciences in which words are data. This paper presents a research method that allows for constructive confrontation in contexts of terrorist violence in European cities, generally considered to be at peace. This method consists of organising public debate in collaboration with community organisations in a neighbourhood directly affected by the aftermath of a wave of terrorist attacks in France. In the case of the Université Populaire, the organisation of public debates allowed for the public expression of agonism, and was a source of hope and prefigurative politics. Exploring this case, this article contributes to discussions about how to deal with the challenges of pluralism within current peace research.

### KEYWORDS

Research methods; PAR; agonistic peace; subaltern; power relations

## Introduction

In November 2015, Hollande declared war on terror. When I asked Muslims in Villeneuve, a marginalised social housing neighbourhood in Grenoble (France), a couple of days later whether 'we' were at war, they responded negatively: "No 'we' [the French] are not at war but 'we' [as Muslims and inhabitants of marginalised social housing neighbourhoods] are not at peace either".<sup>1</sup> This lived experience of situations that can neither be qualified as war, nor as peace is reminiscent of many post-conflict societies. The Muslim inhabitants, who I engaged with during my PhD research, feel not at peace because they are made to feel different in France, their voices are silenced, and they cannot claim the right to have rights.<sup>2</sup> This feeling was not new, but it became even stronger in the period following a wave of terrorist attacks in 2015. There are different approaches to what peace means,<sup>3</sup> but in the context of this article peace means three things: a space for agonism, building a shared future, and the experience of physical and emotional safety. Although some insights into the experiences of Muslims affected by the attacks will be shared throughout the text, the aim of the article is methodological.

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I answer the question how research can contribute to making space for agonism, thereby addressing the pluralism challenge as identified in the introduction to this special issue.

In order to explain how I came to approach peace as agonism, I have to make a short empirical excursion to a research project I carried out in parallel, in collaboration with Ayla Korajac. During a focus group with young adults in the post-war city of Brcko (Bosnia and Herzegovina), one of them, Adnan, gave a perfect definition of the connection between peace and agonism. For him conflict, in the sense of disagreement, was an important aspect of peace, and one that he felt was lacking in Brcko, where people did not mention the war, nor their conflicting ideas about who was responsible for it, in order to keep the peace. This creates a type of peace without justice and that relies on silence rather than respectful confrontation. Adnan wished he was 'able to have a conflict', with which he meant the possibility for open disagreement, 'because [...] new experiences and new knowledge arise from it', adding that only then will he have the feeling that he is living in peace.<sup>4</sup> According to this conception of peace, peace does not rely on consensus, but on the availability of symbolic and material spaces where people can confront each other as political subjects and not as enemies that one seeks to eliminate.

While France is not a habitual terrain for field research in peace studies, I argue that peace and conflict studies also have relevant theoretical tools to offer in the context of recurrent eruptions of violence in European cities, and that we can learn from these spaces because peace is also built in these contexts.<sup>5</sup> Recurrent episodes of violence of different forms affect social and political life in a very broad sense, from the public to its most private and everyday aspects. Drawing on the work of Spivak in subaltern studies, I understand the silencing of Muslim voices as a form of subalternisation, which poses a methodological problem for qualitative research in the social sciences that heavily rely on speech.<sup>6</sup> Including subalternised voices in field research is important for 'approaching peace from different perspectives and vantage points'.<sup>7</sup> This article provides an example of how researchers can make space for subalternised voices in their research design and how they can contribute to making a plurality of voices heard through the organisation of public debates. In this way, this article tries to show one way in which the challenge of pluralism, as one of the main challenges facing peace research today, can be addressed. This challenge is even more important given that academic inquiry as a form of knowledge production is traversed by colonial relations between knowledge and power.<sup>8</sup> Inviting subalternised people to speak, for example in interviews, is part of the problem pointed out by Spivak, of being denied a voice on their own terms.<sup>9</sup> The relations between power imbalances and silencing is a recurrent theme in interview literature, also in peace research.<sup>10</sup> In interviews, those who are subalternised answer questions formulated by a researcher, reflecting the latter's research interest, but they have little room to set their own agenda or define their own research questions. This is an example of how research can reinforce silencing practices. Other common pitfalls of interviews are that they can be intrusive, can have the function of knowledge extraction and can misrepresent marginalised people and spaces.<sup>11</sup>

In my search to navigate around the limits of language in working with marginalised groups and the risk of betrayal when translating stories of marginalised people into academic language, I became involved with the Université Populaire, a community-based people's education initiative.<sup>12</sup> The research method I developed is based on creating spaces for agonistic debate between people holding different positions in society and for

collective learning.<sup>13</sup> A space for agonistic debate belongs to the public sphere and is publicly accessible; it may form in public space, but more often forms in a space that is closed by walls and a door, as the latter offers a form of protection and separates the space from the street.

The article is structured as follows: first, it situates the proposed research method within the field of participatory action research (PAR), and intervention research in particular. Second, it provides contextual information about subalternisation in France by discussing the feelings of Muslims in Villeneuve that they could not speak after the attack on the weekly satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*. Third, it makes the case that research can contribute to conscientisation and controlled confrontation, which are important steps in conflict transformation and the building of agonistic peace. Fourth, it showcases how I contributed through my engagement with the Université Populaire to the creation of spaces of speech that sought a balance between safety and confrontation. Fifth, it discusses the limits of organising plenary debates in peace research.

### **Intervention research: going beyond ‘Do no harm’**

Many research protocols and ethics guidelines in social sciences adopt a ‘do no harm’ approach, seeking to prevent any negative impact from research on participants.<sup>14</sup> Inspired by developments in PAR, I propose to turn the question around and look for ways research can contribute to the communities with which it engages and have a positive impact on situations of conflict, violence and oppression. Using debate as a research method builds on a long tradition of people’s education and PAR, a term used for a wide range of approaches that aim to bring together research and action through the participation of people primarily concerned with the object of research. The basic principle of action research is that ‘the best way to understand something is to try to change it’.<sup>15</sup> In the context of my research this meant that the best way to understand silencing practices in the context of recurrent episodes of violence and territorial stigmatisation is to participate in existing initiatives, and to work alongside silenced groups who seek to make their voices heard. Different strands of PAR developed in different parts of the world and in different disciplines.<sup>16</sup> None of the descriptions of how to carry out PAR correspond exactly to the research I carried out in Villeneuve.<sup>17</sup> The form of PAR that comes closest to my engagement with the Université Populaire, and which has been a source of inspiration, is Nicolas-le-Strat’s conception of ‘intervention research’ (*recherche intervention*).<sup>18</sup> This form of PAR, developed in France, is about intervening in and writing about a reality that the researcher helps to bring about, for example by actively participating in initiatives that aim to redress power inequality in contexts of conflict or oppression. It is through operating change that forms of resistance become tangible and it is in challenging power relations that they become visible.<sup>19</sup> According to Nicolas-Le Strat, in intervention research, a researcher contributes to bringing about a certain situation in order to be able to explore it.<sup>20</sup> A situation never just is, but is always in movement and to be able to study a situation one has to gain knowledge of the dynamics involved in it. Intervention research is one of the ‘methodological tools and strategies that can capture the micro-dynamics of everyday relationships, practices, and emotions’.<sup>21</sup> Through acting on a situation, one gets a better understanding of the forces involved in

producing a certain situation. Thus, according to Nicolas-Le Strat, even more than producers of knowledge, researchers are makers of social realities. The issue therefore is not only which methodology produces which kind of knowledge, but also which methodology produces which kind of situations.

Through my research ‘interventions’ in collaboration with the Université Populaire, I joined ongoing processes and contributed to their outcomes. During these research ‘interventions’, power relations rapidly became manifest, while they were more difficult to capture in other situations. For example, through the resistance that the working group of the Université Populaire encountered during the organisation of the first plenary debate on racism, discrimination and islamophobia from local administrators and white French neighbourhood residents, I could observe the actors and dynamics involved in silencing Muslim inhabitants.

### Tensions and silence in Villeneuve after several terrorist attacks

In our society we can't express ourselves, we can't give our opinion. If we give our opinion, we are this or we are that. We are more and more censored. We don't dare [to speak out] anymore. If I say that, what will happen to me?<sup>22</sup>

It was already a little bit before the *Charlie Hebdo* attack, but this [attack] has turned everything upside down [...]. I said to myself that we could get in a period of war, but war didn't happen. But nevertheless, after all that had happened in France, I said to myself, this is it, we are screwed, and they will not understand who we really are. They already didn't understand it before, but now it's even worse.<sup>23</sup>

The terrorist attacks that took place in Paris in 2015 reinforced the lines between ‘us’ and ‘them’; ‘us’ being the White/French and ‘them’ being Muslims in France. These tensions were felt particularly in marginalised social neighbourhoods in France. One such neighbourhood is Villeneuve in Grenoble, where I carried out my PhD research. After the attacks, Muslims had the acute feeling that they were not heard, that they could not speak, as the two quotes at the beginning of this section illustrate.<sup>24</sup> One's capacity to speak can be measured through the ability to leave traces in official records; and even more so in the capacity to make one's claims heard. Being heard means that one is able to attribute meaning to events, and that this meaning is taken into account in the way events are then remembered. Racialised people in Villeneuve face quite some disbelief and resistance from white people when they state that not everyone can speak in the public sphere. According to Jouda, a Muslim woman who is one of the founding members of the Université Populaire, there is a ‘neo-colonial’ element to the fact that people cannot express themselves and, in fact, are inhibited from the public expression of their experiences and positions, since their statements are always called into question and disqualified by established actors.<sup>25</sup>

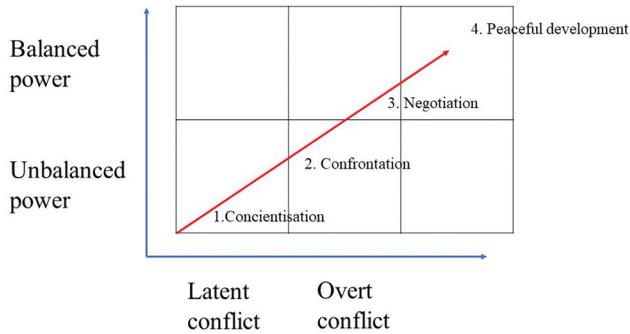
The subalternisation of Muslims in Villeneuve in the period following the attacks against *Charlie Hebdo* intersects with a second, and more permanent, form of subalternisation that concerns marginalised social housing neighbourhoods. As a result of the discursive articulation of these spaces as other, dangerous and deviant, inhabitants' ‘voices are turned into noises’.<sup>26</sup> Muslim research participants deal with this double subalternisation, which the Université Populaire sought to address.

The Université Populaire provides a space where members of community organisations set the agenda for public debates and where participants can share their thoughts publicly in the presence of both like-minded people and those having divergent experiences and opinions. It was created in 2015 in a double context of violence: two major terrorist attacks in Paris and lethal violence by a group of twenty young men from Villeneuve against two young men from a neighbouring marginalised neighbourhood. In the period that followed the 2015 terrorist attack against *Charlie Hebdo* many people in the neighbourhood were concerned about the tensions and felt a need for speaking openly about them. Those involved in founding the Université Populaire were the director of a community centre, active members of the community involved in various organisations, a community liaison person and myself. The founding members, and others that subsequently joined, formed the Université Populaire's working group, which was diverse in terms of gender, religion, immigration histories, level of formal education, and class. The working group shared an interest in furthering the aims of creating debate about issues that divide French society. All members of the working group had access to important networks in the neighbourhood and beyond. In the Université Populaire, the topics of the lethal youth violence and its prevention disappeared to the background, and made place for debate about discrimination, islamophobia, neighbourhood stigmatisation, and the legacy of the colonial past in France.<sup>27</sup>

### Conscientisation and confrontation: steps towards agonistic peace

The subaltern position of Muslims in French society is the result of asymmetric power relations between an established and a marginalised group.<sup>28</sup> According to Curle, asymmetric power relations can be analysed as latent conflicts, and are incompatible with peaceful relations.<sup>29</sup> Curle developed a model to analyse the transformation of unpeaceful relationships into peaceful ones. In line with an agonistic conception of peace, peace is not the resolution of conflict, but is concerned with channelling antagonistic violent relations into agonistic ones.<sup>30</sup> Peacebuilding is about creating such channels, which, again, is not devoid of conflict, nor is the space opened up by this conflict without the risk of violence, but 'this potential is actually mitigated by allowing conflict to play an integrative role' according to Springer.<sup>31</sup> Drawing on Rancière, he explains that if there is no space for agonism, 'the activity of governance continually risks pacification' and violence may become an option.<sup>32</sup> The movement towards more peaceful and more symmetric power relationships, based on reciprocity, may hence involve a temporary increase in overt (non-violent) conflict.<sup>33</sup> Mouffe reminds us that entering the arena of agonistic confrontations is what being political is all about.<sup>34</sup> However, in neo-liberal societies possibilities for politics as agonistic confrontation are lacking because the material and symbolic space of politics are ideologically foreclosed, as stated by Garnier.<sup>35</sup> Laclau and Mouffe share this analysis and call for 'radical democracy', which occurs when 'those who the sovereign deems to not count insist on being counted' according to Springer, and this is exactly when subalterns become political subjects.<sup>36</sup>

The Grenoble based independent research institute in conflict transformation, Modus operandi, of which I am part, adapted Curle's model to analyse power asymmetry in France (Figure 1). Unpeaceful relations are here defined as relations characterised by political exclusion, lack of recognition, and economic exploitation. The model shows that



**Figure 1.** Curles's model of challenging asymmetric power relations. Adapted by C. Dijkema with permission from the Network University and Modus Operandi.

the first stage of transforming latent conflict is to raise awareness about power imbalances and to translate them into claims (stage 1: conscientisation); the second stage is to organise, to politicise grievances and to publicise them (stage 2: confrontation). It is only then that a marginalised group can begin to negotiate on a more equal footing with those who hold power over it (stage 3: negotiation) and that it may be successful in creating relationships built on a more equal footing (stage 4: which Curle called 'peaceful development').<sup>37</sup> The habitual reservations about models of conflict transformation are also applicable here: that no process is linear and that any process may suffer setbacks and may be stalled. The focus of this article is on the first two stages of the model, because they correspond to the work of the Université Populaire. In the first stage the conflict is latent, inequality is epidermal, people feel it on their skin and are confronted with it in a very physical way,<sup>38</sup> however they might lack the words and the analytical tools to translate their experience into political discourse. This is what happens in the movement from the first to the second phase, which involves the much-needed disruption of the status quo through contradiction and confrontation. It depends on raising awareness among the marginalised group about its conditions (x-axis) and on an increase in their power (y-axis).

### Spaces of agonistic debate: a methodological proposal

Peaceful relations require spaces of contradiction and confrontation (as demonstrated previously) and this section explains how my research with the Université Populaire contributed to this. How can organising public debates serve the double goal of creating spaces of agonism in a specific area, and of data collection in situations of tensions between established and marginalised groups? As mentioned, a space for agonistic debate belongs to the public sphere and is publicly accessible; it may form in public space, but more often forms in a space that is closed by walls and a door, as the latter offers a form of protection and separates the space from the street. This closure helps to constitute a group for a particular moment in time, and in a particular space. The spaces of debate that the Université Populaire opened up, created room for the constructive confrontation of adversarial ideas. They offered a platform for counterpublics that formed

simultaneously in parallel spaces and forms of organisation in the neighbourhood. Counterpublics are ‘a subset of publics that stand in conscientious opposition to a dominant ideology and strategically subvert that ideology’s construction in public discourse’.<sup>39</sup> The objective of these debates is not to provide safety through assuring that there is a relatively homogenous group, but to arrange for the controlled confrontation between a heterogenous public. As will become clear in this section, collaborative agenda setting, moderators, and small table configurations are some of the tools that were helpful for mitigating power relations and to lift some of the imposed silences. Although the focus of the article is on the plenary debates organised by the Université Populaire, it is the entire process of organising these debates that produced relevant data.

Making space for agonistic debate in a context of power relations that tend towards silencing, is a process that needs to fulfil the functions of the first two stages of Curle’s model (Figure 1), conscientisation and confrontation. Although conscientisation and confrontation typically take place simultaneously: they are outcomes of a process, which involves some form of progress. This process takes place in different spaces whose function alters between safe(r) spaces and spaces of confrontation.<sup>40</sup> In safe(r) spaces power relations are configured in such a way that speech becomes possible and in spaces of controlled confrontation a public that has a tense relationship, for example because it is divided on political issues, comes together. To make confrontation possible conscientisation is a necessary first step: conscientisation in the context of this study does not mean making people individually aware of a problem, because mostly they are, but awareness shifts from an individual to a collective level, through the sharing of experiences and analyses.

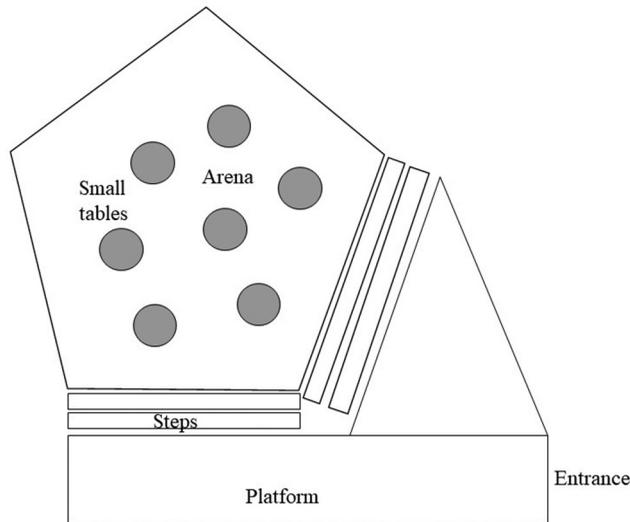
The principal benefits of organising public debate as a means of data collection in comparison to interviews is that they create a setting in which the knowledge of the research participant expresses him or herself in a less guided way than when prompted by the researcher in an interview setting. Configuring spaces of agonistic confrontation corresponds to some extent to the advantages of focus groups. These are for example that focus groups are sensitive to the political and social context in which research takes place, can create a sense of safety, are less intrusive than interviews, and may elicit stories based on shared experiences of participants.<sup>41</sup> The specificity of organising plenary debates as research method is that the responsibility for moderating the debate and formulating a research question lies not with the researcher alone, but is shared with a group of people directly affected by silencing practices. Other characteristics that distinguish public debates from focus groups as research method is that the former are public, open to all who are interested, and that the researcher (together with a working group) only has indirect control over who participates through deciding together on the channels through which the information about the debates is spread.

Among the different spaces of speech in the Université Populaire, such as meeting rooms, street debates, discussion circles, workshops and plenary debates, some had the role of safe(r) spaces (discussion circles and meetings),<sup>42</sup> and others had the role of constructive confrontation (plenary debates). The spaces of speech differed in their levels of publicity (public space versus behind closed doors); of safety (intimacy) versus confrontation; and in their group configuration (number, social position, gender). The spatial dimension of publicity of these different spaces of speech ranged from meeting rooms, which had the least publicity (behind two doors) to street debates, which had the

largest degree of publicity because they took place in open public space. Street debates are short and informal discussions in public space that aim to extend the plenary debate to public space in order to include a larger number of people that would not cross the doorstep of more institutionalised spaces, which each had their own constituency; to publicise information about the upcoming plenary debate by handing out flyers; and to test reactions to the working group's formulation of the problem statement that it had prepared to be used for small-table discussions during the plenary debate. It was the articulation between these different spaces, from closed spaces that allowed the establishment of more profound relationships to public spaces outside of walls that allowed discussion with the widest range of people possible. The plenary debates of the Université Populaire functioned as a political arena. To make space for speech inevitably challenges the status quo, because it involves making space for the expression of what is supposed to remain silent. An indicator that the Université Populaire challenged the status quo, is that its intention to publicly speak out about racism, islamophobia, territorial stigmatisation, and about the legacy of the colonial past, met important resistance in the neighbourhood and beyond. Institutional actors, older white inhabitants, and two members of the working group, who joined later in the process, each employed different strategies to deviate the intentions of the working group, such as accusing it of providing a platform for fascist ideas, of creating conflict in the neighbourhood, and of inviting dangerous speakers.<sup>43</sup> This critique from powerful actors in the neighbourhood finally led to a cut in the public funding the Université Populaire had received initially. I now turn to the question how the Université Populaire working group could mitigate power relations prior to and during plenary debates.

### ***The spatial configuration of debates***

The spatial configuration of the plenary debates contributed to their success as participants themselves noted, who mentioned the disposition of the room, the small group formations for debates as factors of success. The plenary debate was made up of four sub-spaces of speech that each had their own function in allowing for controlled confrontation: the arena, the arrangement of small tables, steps and a platform (Figure 2). The arena is the centre of the space, where the plenary debate takes place. Small tables placed in this arena created the opportunity for exchange in small groups, provided some form of intimacy and lowered the threshold to take the floor (Figure 3 and 4). Steps on one side of the hall that connected the arena to a platform and the entrance provided participants a space to sit that was less engaging than the seating at small tables, where one had to directly interact with others (Figure 5). The steps allowed a person to observe before entering the arena and to keep some distance from the core of the debate in the arena. The platform was a semi-separate space for informal exchange (Figure 6). It allowed one-to-one discussions before and after the plenary debate and made it easier to express minority points of view and mitigated some of the limits of plenary debates as research method, which I discuss later. After the debate, I specifically looked for people who (it seemed to me) had non-verbally expressed frustration or disagreement and approached them as invitation to speak out. Snacks and drinks on a large table on the platform contributed to creating an informal sphere and shared meals after some of the debates had the same function (Figure 7). These



**Figure 2.** Sketch of the spatial configuration of the plenary session with a small table setting. C. Dijkema.



**Figure 3.** Small table configuration in the Salle polyvalente. Photo C. Dijkema, March 11, 2016.

different subspaces allowed participants to go back and forth between the intimacy of small group configurations and the public nature of the plenary.

A diverse audience assured the fine balance between providing safety through some form of homogeneity and contradiction through heterogeneity. In the context of this article homogeneity refers to a shared geographical area (neighbourhood/city) and a shared language; and heterogeneity refers to race; class; religion; level of formal education; political orientation; and age. Invited speakers frequently commented on this diversity, which they only rarely encountered in events organised in marginalised social housing neighbourhoods.<sup>44</sup> This mix is partly due to the history of Villeneuve, partly to the diversity of the working group, whose members were connected to a variety



**Figure 4.** Informal discussion at small tables. Photo C. Dijkema, November 20, 2015.



**Figure 5.** Plenary debate at the Salle Polyvalente des Baladins. People are seated both at small tables and on the steps. Photo C. Dijkema, November, 20, 2015.

of networks in the neighbourhood and beyond, and partly because the issues were framed in such a way that spoke to these different constituencies.

The means through which the working group could influence power relations during the plenary debates were moderation, small table discussions, and invited speakers. Typically, the moderator is a person who comes from a marginalised group and who enjoys the esteem of different constituencies. In the case of the Université Populaire most of the debates were moderated by Jouda, a Muslim woman, community leader, and professionally employed by the Régie de quartier in Villeneuve, a community development organisation based on a triple partnership between residents, local authorities and social landlords. Her role is to assure the liaison between institutions and inhabitants. She enjoys a lot of esteem in the neighbourhood and in networks beyond it, also among those



**Figure 6.** Informal discussion after a debate at La Cordée. Photo C. Dijkema, January, 22, 2018.



**Figure 7.** Members of the working group cook a shared dinner. Photo: C. Dijkema, June 10, 2016.

who are hostile to Muslim women wearing a veil (which is her case). One way for the moderator(s) to act on power relations is through distributing speaking time.

The small-table discussions were mostly moderated by people representing minority voices, such as Muslim women. In order to prepare the latter for this role and to reinforce their capacity to handle conflict, a member of the working group organised a three-hour training by a local association specialised in community organising.<sup>45</sup> This training was a safe space where women exchanged experiences of intimidation, fear, discomfort in public debates, and tools that were helpful to ‘manage conflict’ in the discussion.

Inviting external speakers is another means to balance power relations because they introduce analytical frameworks that may help people to understand their own experience, but also legitimise the feelings and analyses of subalternised participants. These

analytical frameworks provide the vocabulary to defend their ideas. The choice of inviting external speakers is inherently political and led to long debates in the working group. The working group's choice of invited speakers was regularly contested. During the debate cycle on colonial legacies, the participation of academics served to take away fears in the neighbourhood. Particularly among older white participants, academics were seen as representing academic neutrality. The working group used this representation strategically to reassure those opposing the Université Populaire working group that it did not provide a platform to supposedly fascist ideologies. Their presence, in addition to that of efficient moderators helped to pacify the debate. It turned out that plenary debates could play a role in healing or therapy and could bring hope.

### ***Contradiction and controlled confrontation as a source of hope and prefigurative politics***

My interpretation of the plenary debates of the Université Populaire as space of contradiction and controlled confrontation is partly based on participants' comments. In this section I turn to their remarks about the process and how it contributed to an agonistic form of peace. In an interview with a local radio station after a debate about *Charlie Hebdo*, its cartoons of Prophet Muhammad, and freedom of expression, Fatima, a Muslim woman, explained her experience of the debate:

[The debate on *Charlie Hebdo* and the freedom of speech] counterbalanced images we usually see in the media. [A debate at the Université Populaire] is a moment of encounter with people with whom you don't necessarily have the opportunity to discuss outside of these types of events. There was a mix of origins, religions, cultures, and generations. It was very beautiful to see. Here we had the impression of being at someone's place, in an intimate setting, and at the same time we could see that it was possible to discuss with someone who doesn't necessarily think the same as we do. At the same table, we could have different opinions without insulting each other or hitting each other. These evenings, at least the one I attended, allow us to talk as from person to person, simply as human beings.<sup>46</sup>

Fatima felt particularly down after the attacks and affected by the change in the way (she felt) people perceived her with her long robes and black veil. She had reached out to neighbours in her apartment building and invited them for what she called a 'tea of friendship' (*thé de l'amitié*), but the Université Populaire allowed her to establish relationships with a wider group of people. The quote above stresses the importance of the respectful encounter of people with diverging opinions in local contexts of division. The location was not neutral, but intimate 'as if at someone's place', it humanised her in a context where she felt dehumanised through media representations. It is in acknowledging mutual difference in a space where none can claim to represent the norm or the order that people can be equal. Another Muslim woman, Mariette, who converted to Islam as a young adult, explained in the same radio interview as Fatima that the debate gave her hope:

It gave us hope because really things are a bit rough at the moment. We can see that people, especially the elderly, are a little more worried, so this is also an opportunity to put our cards on the table in order to reassure each other, to exchange ideas, to express ourselves because we don't always have the opportunity to express ourselves.<sup>47</sup>

The debate gave her hope, not only because it opened a space for the expression of discord, but also because it allowed her to meet those who fear Muslims in France, and to reassure them. It is not only conflict and opposition that people seek in these debate settings, they also seek constructive relationships. Participants as well as invited speakers commented that these gatherings were a reflection of what they wanted society to look like, of the plurality of a society in the making. One of the invited speakers, Abdelaziz Chaambi, formulated a similar hope, that the Université Populaire was the prefiguration of something new:

[This Université Populaire] gives me a little hope that not all is lost! [...] Maybe it is the beginning of a solution, of a way to manage to be able to talk to each other again, to succeed in breaking down the barriers of class, race, religion, ethnicity, origin. To say that we can sit down around the table and let it all out.<sup>48</sup>

Ince explains that prefiguration is “a distinctive concept in anarchist thought and practice embedding envisioned future modes of social organisation into the present.”<sup>49</sup> The experience of hope mentioned by Mariette and Chaambi points to prefigurative politics: organising public debates has a political function in a context where people say that they are not heard and contributes to the prefiguration, or imagination, of what society can look like.<sup>50</sup>

### **Discussing silences**

In addition to the political function of public debate as a method in peace research, an additional benefit is that debates create occasions for breaking silences. The shared experience of participants mutually actualises knowledge that the researcher otherwise would not have access to. This has been the case for example when participants of the Université Populaire spoke about their painful experiences during a series of debates about colonial legacies and the Algerian independence war. One of the participants, Hamid, turned to the plenary and asked what he should do as a witness of atrocities during the Algerian war, should he talk about them to his children and grandchildren?<sup>51</sup> Another participant in the audience answered: ‘Speak, speak, speaking will set you free’. Later on, in a private discussion, Hamid explained that the atrocity he referred to concerns a rape scene: ‘we can’t speak about that’. Participants turned to each other for mutual recognition, support and answers, aware of and accepting my presence but not speaking to me. Moreover, the advantage of plenary debates in comparison to interviews is that by getting out of the privacy of an interview setting, and by entering the public sphere the people that I would otherwise interview, speak under the supervision of their peers. This is a way of circumventing the risk Lapeyronnie pointed out, that inhabitants in marginalised social housing neighbourhoods ‘do not say what they think, or they think what they don’t say’.<sup>52</sup> Socially desirable responses, a typical bias in interviews, would be contradicted by other participants in plenary debates. In particular the debates and contradictions among participants are a precious source of information for a researcher.

Speaking about suffering may break silences but is not sufficient for becoming political subjects, it needs to be accompanied by the enactment of agency. There is even a risk to proposing speaking out as a tool of empowerment for marginalised groups. If the frame in which marginalised persons are invited to speak encourages the accounts of

victimhood rather than their agency, and if it does not make space for anger, speaking out may reinforce victimhood rather than empowerment. The Université Populaire was careful with testimonies. However, it did not go as far as proposing any form of direct action and muscular engagement, following Dorlin's recommendations in her work on political self-defence traditions.<sup>53</sup> It only offered verbal forms of confrontation. This confrontation in a constructive setting is important because, as Dorlin demonstrates, when marginalised groups take a political stand, a common reaction of those in a dominant position is to depict them as a threat. Plenary debates obviously present limits as space for the production of speech, and therefore data, which I turn to in the next section.

### **Limits of organising plenary debates in peace research**

First, there are practical limitations. Participation has a cost for observation: being involved in the organisation of debates is an impediment to the quality of one's observations during meetings and debates. Second, there are issues around the quality of data. Information that is shared publicly in debates is necessarily concise, as the speaker's time is limited, and researchers cannot probe the research participant for more detailed information and cannot paraphrase to verify whether they understood the statement correctly. Small table discussions can mitigate this limit to a certain extent, but if they are not recorded, or if no systematic note taking is provided for, they do not produce data. Moreover, statements in plenary debates are made in front of an audience so there is also an element of performance involved, and this can affect the way a person tells a story, possibly exaggerating the narrated events for a higher impact of the story on the audience.

Third, there are limits to the extent power mitigation is successful. Although a working group in charge of organising public debates can make room for subalternised voices through a combination of dispositifs, the space of these debates is not void of power relations. Speaking in public is a factor of stress and only the most confident will take the floor in the plenary. While the Université Populaire working group was very attentive to the power dynamics between racialised and white participants, and between levels of formal education, it rapidly understood that it had underestimated gender. Men of a certain age were systematically the first to take the floor, and quickly filled the space that had been created. Women came later and expressed their feelings of having to claim the space and the anguish that went with this. Over time the working group became stricter with the distribution of speaking time, which resulted in frustration and criticism from some of the habitual participants of the Université Populaire who were older Arab men. Creating space for some is experienced by others (and often rightly so) as if space is closing for them, which can be an important source of frustration and conflict. Moderators had to be able to deal with these kinds of frustrations that occasionally led to aggressive behaviour.

Fourth, accessing minority positions during plenary debates is a challenge. Overall, group debates are not the proper format for discussing topics that touch on the intimate and taboos. In the latter case the privacy of interview settings might work better, but plenary debates also provided some opportunities to discuss more private matters through semi-separate spaces for informal change. For example, a participant

approached the invited speaker of one of the plenary debates about the Algerian independence war, and confided to her an experience he had not shared before. In addition, it is important to note that the plenary debates were but one moment in a much longer process of making agonism possible in the Université Populaire, which also involve other (safer) spaces to speak out. To further overcome these limits, other research methods, such as interviews, can be used in combination. It is ironic that while the organisation of plenary debates as research method was born out of a desire not to do interviews, I reverted back to the latter in order to have more in-depth discussions with participants, during which I could verify whether I correctly understood what they had said during the plenary debate and obtain more background information. The interviews complemented the data already collected during the first cycle of plenary debates organised by the Université Populaire (2015–2016) and provided the necessary context to correctly interpret the statements prompted by the debate topics that were the outcome of a collective decision-making process and by the public present during the debates.

## Conclusion

The Université Populaire opened a space to speak about one's experiences of injustice. This research method is a means to avoid resource extraction because speech is brought into the public sphere and can be owned by all those participating. The power of speaking in the plenary sessions partially lay in the fact that those who were depicted as not entirely belonging to the French nation could meet interlocutors: persons among the participants who incarnated majority society and who would have to listen to them. In the context of the Paris terrorist attacks, the plenary debates of the Université Populaire were an occasion for the subalternised to answer to hegemonic mainstream media representations of Muslims: they created opportunities for direct contact in a constructive setting. The possibility to express themselves and to disagree is what made marginalised participants equal and what made them feel human. Plenary debates are occasions for prefigurative politics if they provide the marginalised the opportunity to speak and act as citizens, if people can question and challenge the status quo, and if they create space for pluralism. The conditions that determine whether public debates have a political function are that the topics of debate need to reflect the interests of marginalised people; a certain form of confrontation needs to be made possible; to make this possible power relations need to be mitigated, for example through moderation techniques and the configuration of different spaces of speech. The spatial configurations of debate include the arrangement of tables for small group discussions; an arena that speaks to the idea of agora; steps to provide a space at the margins for those hesitating to directly step into the arena; and a platform as a separate space for informal exchange. Public debates that fulfil the above-mentioned conditions offer a way of engaging with marginalised groups without being intrusive; they open the one-to-one relationship that is typical of interviews to a much wider circle; and they are moments of collective learning in which participants voluntarily share their knowledge. Hence, plenary debates are an interesting method to further explore in peace research and can contribute to the political subjectivity of marginalised groups, as well as to ease tensions in a neighbourhood that deals with the aftermath of recurrent episodes of violence.

## Notes

1. Field Notes 18 November 2015.
2. Dijkema, 'Subaltern in France'.
3. See e.g. Söderström et al., 'Friends, Fellows, and Foes', Jarstad et al., *Varieties of peace: presentation of a research program*.
4. Dijkema and Korajac, 'Urban peace, a spatial approach', 21.
5. Dijkema, 'Geographies of peace in non-war cities'.
6. Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?'.
7. Olivius and Åkebo, 'Exploring Varieties of Peace', 4. See also Söderström and Olivius. 'Pluralism, temporality and affect – methodological challenges of making peace researchable'.
8. See Hancock, "'Délivrez-Nous de l'exotisme'", Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*.
9. Kock, 'An Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak'.
10. For a discussion, see e.g. Söderström, 'Life Diagrams'.
11. hooks, 'Marginality as a Site of Resistance', Morelle and Ripoll, 'Les chercheur-es face aux injustices', Hancock, 'Décoloniser Les Représentations', Piedalue and Rishi, 'Unsettling the South through Postcolonial Feminist Theory'.
12. Dijkema, 'Subaltern in France'.
13. This research protocol is approved by the Ethics Commission of the University of Basel, ref. no. 106.
14. Hesse-Biber and Leavy, *Emergent Methods in Social Research*, Manzo and Brightbill, 'Towards a Participatory Ethics'. For a critique, see Hugman et al. "When 'Do No Harm' Is Not Enough".
15. Greenwood and Levin, *Introduction to Action Research*, 19.
16. Cope, 'Becoming a Scholar-Advocate', Kindon, Pain, and Kesby, *Participatory Action Research Approaches and Methods*, Reason and Bradbury, *Handbook of Action Research*, Tremblay, 'Une Sociologie de La Recherche Partenariale'.
17. The disjunctions between PAR descriptions and my own experience are that most PAR projects produce information about the actions and functioning of one particular organisation, while I worked with 10 different groups, that most PAR projects produce information about the working of an organisation, while I was interested in working together towards the goals they set, and finally that my entry-point was not organisational but geographical, driven by the choice to engage with a specific geographic area that had recently been the location of eruptions of violence and not with one specific organisation that had accomplished extraordinary work.
18. Nicolas-Le Strat, *Quand La Sociologie Entre Dans l'action*.
19. Intervention research builds on institutional analysis, see Hess and Savoye, *Perspectives de l'analyse institutionnelle*, Lapassade, 'L'analyse institutionnelle', Lourau, *L'analyse institutionnelle*, and on the sociology of collective action and social movements, see Touraine, *La Voix et Le Regard*.
20. Nicolas-Le Strat, *Quand La Sociologie Entre Dans l'action*, 79.
21. Söderström and Olivius, 'Pluralism, Time and Affect – Methodological Challenges of Making Peace Researchable'.
22. Participant, Université Populaire plenary debate, 20/11/2015.
23. Tina, interview, 9/5/2017.
24. When quoting from interviews I use pseudonyms, following ethical guidelines of the University of Basel, despite interviewees preference for using their real first name. When I quote from public debates, I use the term 'participants'. Invited speakers are quoted with their full names as they are public persons.
25. To support her argument, Jouda gave the example of a recent meeting with women in the neighbourhood and professionals in charge of social policy and education. When the women spoke about the discourse of some teachers, described by Jouda as 'more than

- discourteous, almost racist', a white person working for a local development organisation called into question these women's experiences of discrimination.
26. Dikeç, *Badlands of the Republic*, 152. See also Dijkema, 'Revendiquer sa juste place'.
  27. For more information about the debates, and the publications and videos the Université Populaire produced, see <https://www.modop.org/espaces-de-parole/luniversite-populaire-de-la-villeneuve>.
  28. About silencing practices and Muslims following the terrorist attacks in France, for example see Dijkema, 'Claiming space', Hancock and Mobillion, "I Want to Tell Them", Lizotte 'Laïcité as Assimilation, Laïcité as Negotiation', Najib, Teeple Hopkins, 'Geographies of Islamophobia', Niang Mame-Fatou, *Identités françaises: banlieues, féminités et universalisme*.
  29. Curle, *Making Peace*.
  30. Aggestam et al. 'Towards Agonistic Peacebuilding?', Strömbom, 'Exploring Analytical Avenues for Agonistic Peace'.
  31. Springer, 'Public Space as Emancipation', 531.
  32. Rancière, *Disagreement*, 135, Springer, 'Public Space as Emancipation', 533.
  33. The Network University and Modus Operandi, 'Transforming Civil Conflicts'.
  34. Mouffe, 'Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism'.
  35. Garnier, 'Une violence éminemment contemporaine'.
  36. Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Springer, 'Public Space as Emancipation', 532.
  37. The Network University and Modus Operandi, 'Transforming Civil Conflicts'.
  38. Dijkema, 'Subaltern in France'.
  39. Fattal, 'Counterpublic', 1. See also Fraser, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere'.
  40. On safer spaces, see e.g. Kondon, Pain, and Kesby, *Participatory Action Research Approaches and Methods*.
  41. Söderström, 'Focus Groups: Safety in Numbers?', Dijkema, 'Subaltern in France'.
  42. Meetings were generally safe spaces that allowed for a large degree of informality, with the exception of one period when the Université Populaire working group decided the contours for its cycle on the colonial past present (April-July 2017) when it became a terrain for profound disagreements and confrontation of power (see chapter 4).
  43. For a detailed discussion of this resistance and the means employed see Dijkema, 'Subaltern in France'.
  44. Field notes, Université Populaire plenary debate, 20/11/2015.
  45. Alliance Citoyenne, <https://alliancecitoyenne.org/grenoble/>.
  46. Fatima, News FM Radio interview, 25/04/2016.
  47. Mariette, News FM Radio interview, 25/04/2016.
  48. Abdelaziz Chaambi, Université Populaire plenary debate, 20/03/2015.
  49. Ince, 'In the Shell of the Old', 1645.
  50. For a further exploration of the relationship between imagination and reality for making other futures possible, see chapter 7 'The political imagination of the fist and the dove' in Dijkema, 'Subaltern in France'.
  51. Field notes 22 November 2017.
  52. Lapeyronnie, *Ghetto Urbain*, 22.
  53. Dorlin, 'Se Défendre'.

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