



Lab 10 - Artivism against populism

Sponsored by the City of Strasbourg

Moderator:

Ms Nawel RAFIK-ELMRINI (France), Deputy Mayor of the City of Strasbourg
Co-moderator: Mr Suhaib AL-SHROSH AL-MASEDIN, Jordan, Founder of "Haweytna"

Initiatives:

School for Creative Activism (USA) by Professor Stephen DUNCOMBE, Co-Director of the School for Creative Activism
Fearless Collective (Pakistan/India) by Ms Shilo SHIV SULEMAN, Co-Founder of the Fearless Collective
Boiling Point, Mouka Filmi Oy/Boiling Point campaign (Finland), by Ms Riikka KÄMPPI, Campaign manager of Boiling Point.

Discussants:

Ms Lisa ROBINSON (UK), Black Lives Matter UK
Mr Raphaël COMTE (Switzerland), Member of Parliament and Member of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

The lab in brief

While thinking of democracy often recalls the image of a coffeehouse where rational men have rational discussions leading to rational decisions on how to solve certain specific issues, the reality of democracy is quite different in practice. Democracy resembles more the following picture: street-protests, charismatic leaders and populist political speeches intended to trigger an emotional reaction from the targeted audience. As a result, most political decisions made by the civil society are the end-product of an emotional process rather than the outcome of a rational thinking. Being aware of this highlights the necessity for the use of new tools, new languages and new methods in order to strategically make activism more efficient and to allow it reaching a broader audience. The field of activism is indeed one of symbols and significations; thus the goal resides in getting to know how to navigate it and use it in one's best advantage in order to initiate change on a significant scale.

The lab explored the role of arts and culture in shaping political ethics and values, and their impact on generating social and political change.

About the initiatives

School for Creative Activism (USA)

The concept of School for Creative Activism was presented. It consists of a 4-5 day training model that uses techniques from popular culture and artistic practice. After the first few days of workshops, interactive exercises, lectures on for instance "Contemporary Case Studies", "Historical Examples", "Theories of Cognition", "Techniques of Mobilization" and "Creative Campaigns", the activists decide on one "action", having 24 hours at their disposal to implement it.

The initiative focuses on the concept of popular culture, which is "a repository of our dreams, fears, desires and nightmares". According to Professor Duncombe, Director of the School for Creative Activism "Popular culture, whether we like it or not, it is popular" and it can "teach us a lot about how to reach people in a way that resonates with them". He pointed out that popular culture can lead us "to a more robust democracy by teaching us about desires and fears of everyday people and how to speak with them in a way they can hear us".

Fearless Collective (Pakistan/India)

"When was the last time you took part in something beautiful?" According to Ms Shiv Suleman, Co-Founder of the Fearless Collective, "Beauty saves us": people experience beauty without being aware of it, while cooking, shopping or in other ways. The aim of the Fearless Collective is to promote a shift from "fear to love" using participative art in public spaces.

The Fearless Collective defines itself as "soft revolution": the key point is "access" and the aim is to create "a participative movement of women and girls reclaiming public spaces through art and storytelling". Anyone can join the Fearless Collective and contribute to the creation of toolkits. It is, in fact, an open source methodology. An emphasis is placed on "positive affirmations", to make messages empowering and positive. Imagination plays a key role: "love is a collective act of imagination".

Boiling Point, Mouka Filmi Oy/Boiling Point campaign (Finland)

The documentary "Boiling Point" was produced to promote dialogue and respect between people with opposite views, as a division in the country slowly emerged since 2015 due to the refugee crisis. As a result of this division, people either discuss only with like-minded people or they prefer to avoid talking about the issue. The aim of the documentary was to reach everyone, even the people who hold populist and racist views. In the film, two characters with opposing views have a discussion in the sauna. The characters in the film are treated equally and all were created as complex characters.

The distribution of the film was quite unique, the production team set up a website where anyone could register and organise a screening of the film. In the period between February and May, 738 screenings took place in Finland and in other 20 countries (including for instance, Afghanistan, Australia, Japan, Malaysia and Paraguay). This figure is higher as more people after May made requests for screening the film. In total, in the mentioned period 18 000 people participated in these events. It was broadcasted in the Finnish television and it was watched by 250 000 people.

Key points issues by the debate

"Whom and what does ArtiVism transform?" The Fearless Collective focuses on the "reclamation of imagination from fear", so everyone can potentially be impacted by this form of activism since its goal resides in facilitating an easier and more inclusive access to the political battleground. The School for Creative Activism has a direct and strong impact on the activists themselves thanks to the workshop format. Once those activists learn the valuable skills that enable them to navigate the political terrain made up of symbols and significations, by using them to their advantage, they necessarily transmit such knowledge to the communities whom they directly work with. A virtuous cycle is in place. In certain cases it can take some years before having an effective impact, but "somehow it always trickles down". A documentary, such as Boiling Point, allows reaching everyone, included the people "from the other side".

"Are ArtiVism models replicable?" The School for Creative Activism's methods and skills are undoubtedly transferrable to other countries and to any aspiring activists (which is actually the purpose of the School for Creative Activism), but the content itself is not: it has to be adapted to national/local circumstances.

The transfer of the Boiling Point's model happened by itself without any previous intent or expectation: the film received the interest from other countries as well. A report was published on the film's website and people can read the lessons learned during the project. The production team supported a start-up approach and encourages others to work in a similar way and to develop content in co-operation with people/audience.

"Is ArtiVism inclusive?" Does ArtiVism allow speaking with people who do not have the same opinion and to reach people who currently have less access to culture? What role emotions play? And, is consistently resorting to emotions, in order to trigger change, a populist method? The School for Creative Activism cannot be assimilated to any kind of populism, given its ethnocentric way of doing politics. However, activists aim at being popular but any simplistic generalisation and association with populism would be inaccurate. All presenters agree that an efficient way to reach to 'popular' categories within civil society consists in resorting to humour. The Boiling Point documentary, for instance, adopted a strategy, named 'comic relief'; it is easier for people to accept tragedy and generally the message conveyed by such campaigns if comedic pictures are in between to relieve from more dramatic aspects. According to the Fearless Collective, it is important to use a combination of catharsis and transmutation.

Recommendations

- ✓ To encourage the use of popular culture and artistic practice and support initiatives that use art and culture to engage activists and the general public. Such initiatives could include for instance, the development of specific trainings and workshops for activists and other activities carried out in public spaces that have impact also on the general public.
- ✓ To encourage start up approaches when designing such activities: for instance, developing content and materials by engaging people with different opinions in the debate, taking into account their feedback.
- ✓ To support initiatives that are inclusive and accessible and that reach people with less access to arts and culture: in particular, promoting initiatives that use a methodology that is open source and transferrable in other countries and that can be adapted to national/local circumstances.