

Hofmann, Elisabeth

## Staging bodies: learning through feminist activism. Analysis of points emerging from actions by La Barbe and Femen in France

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## Staging bodies: learning through feminist activism. Analysis of points emerging from actions by La Barbe and Femen in France

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### Abstract

*Women do not engage in feminist activism with an educational objective. However, activism has a transformatory effect on the participants, through forms of informal learning that are mainly recognized by the concerned in retrospect. Our research tries to identify which elements of the activist process have the highest informal learning potential in terms of empowerment. We analyse and compare the learning effect of activism in two feminist movements—« La Barbe » and FEMEN—based on the transformative learning concept. « La Barbe » is a French network of women seeking to denounce male domination in official institutions, private and public decision making bodies or important public events (conferences, etc.) concerning the political, financial and other “high level” spheres. FEMEN is a radical feminist protest group founded in Ukraine in 2008, now based in Paris. The organization is highly mediatised for organizing controversial topless protests against sex tourism, religious institutions, sexism, homophobia and other social, national and international topics. This research analyses the informal learning effect of these forms of activism, according to the activists’ own perception, taking into account the ways in which the networks, the public appearances and their preparatory processes are organised.*

**Keywords:** empowerment; feminist activism; performative activism; staging bodies; transformative learning



## Introduction

Women do not engage in feminist activism with an educational objective in mind, but to advance a cause. However, the hypothesis that activism has a transformative effect on female activists has been validated in other research studies (English & Peters, 2012) and this is in line with a broader movement towards recognizing learning which emerges from volunteering in non-profit organizations<sup>2</sup>. The learning effects of feminist militancy are mainly detected retrospectively by those concerned and the (formal or informal) learning mechanisms at work have still not been much elucidated. Our study has sought to identify those factors within the activist process which have potential for female activists' learning, particularly in terms of empowerment (Williams, 1994; Oxaal and Baden, 1997). More specifically, we emphasize the effect of the staging of physical and bodily aspects which are central to the activist processes of our two chosen organizations, La Barbe and FEMEN.

La Barbe is a French network of (exclusively women) activists seeking to denounce male domination in private and public organizations, within official decision-making bodies or during important public events (conferences, etc.) in "high level" political, economic, university, artistic or other spheres. La Barbe members burst into these public events wearing false beards; they make ironic speeches, backed up by leaflets and banners. They record their appearances on camera and disseminate the videos on line.

FEMEN is a radical feminist protest group (also made up entirely of women) founded in Ukraine in 2008 and now based in Paris. Their controversial protests have great media impact. These take the form of appearances by FEMEN activists with their breasts exposed and covered with slogans during public events or in symbolic places. FEMEN attempts in this way to combat patriarchy, dictatorship, the influence of religions, prostitution and other social, national and international issues of concern.

In both cases, there is a certain form of "imaging" the critique of gender inequalities, sexist discrimination, or other forms of social relations of dominance directed against women. These stagings of female bodies—more hidden in the case of La Barbe, more exposed in that of FEMEN—very clearly seek to obtain media coverage which plays a key role in terms of the contribution these forms of activism make towards learning. Our investigation aims to analyze and compare the learning effects of activism through imaging and staging within these two feminist performative movements<sup>3</sup>—La Barbe and FEMEN—drawing on the concept of transformative learning developed by Mezirow (1997, p. 5). For him:

Transformative learning is the process of effecting change in a frame of reference. Adults have acquired a coherent body of experience—associations, concepts, values, feelings, conditioned responses—frames of reference that define their life world. Frames of reference are the structures of assumptions through which we understand our experiences. They selectively shape and delimit expectations, perceptions, cognition, and feelings. They set our "line of action." Once set, we automatically move from one specific activity (mental or behavioural) to another. We have a strong tendency to reject ideas that fail to fit our preconceptions, labelling those ideas as unworthy of consideration—aberrations, nonsense, irrelevant, weird, or mistaken. When circumstances permit, transformative learners move toward a frame of reference that is more inclusive, discriminating, self-reflective, and integrative of experience.

## The educational effect of feminist activism through staging—how can we detect its impact on women activists?

The UNESCO Chair in Training of Sustainable Development Professionals which supports this study is intended to address the issues involved in training people to operationalize the much praised and equally much disparaged notion of sustainable development. On the one hand, our task is to educate in a cross-disciplinary way and at different levels, fostering the capacity to grasp complexity and to master processes favoring participation and inclusion of very different populations. “Traditional” university or other training courses, classroom- or lecture-based and delivered over a short, more or less intense period, have their limits as a means of training future professionals to combine their expertise and social skills operationally. Moreover, the Chair seeks to explore and raise awareness of other forms of learning suitable for training individuals in how to initiate, support and strengthen societal changes at various levels. Our studies concern processes of supervised action-training, coaching, training methods inspired by community education, as well as informal and transformative learning arising from participation in collective processes and various forms of activism. This is the background to our research on the effects of activism in terms of the learning acquired by activists. Feminist activism has a special place here, since the cause it defends is clearly linked to the personal, professional, or even private life of female activists, in contrast to other types of activism (for example Europeans fighting hunger or poverty in countries of the Global South) which may aim more at the rights of third parties linked less directly to the life of the activists.

This work is inspired and driven by the feminist activism of the author and her collaborator and their personal experiences of the impact of their activities in terms of transformative learning. Their awareness of this impact positions them emphatically in a posture of situated knowledge as conceptualized by Donna Haraway (1988): this questioning has emerged from their personal experience and their research draws upon their activist networks. The author collaborated throughout the research with one of the founder members of the La Barbe group in Bordeaux, which facilitated contacts for carrying out a survey and made it possible to include some elements of participant observation in this study. All the data collection took place between 2013 and 2015.

The choice of these two organizations, La Barbe and FEMEN, was based on various factors: firstly, both organizations are relatively recent, and are part of a certain renewal of feminist modes of action in Europe. Indeed, the caricatural aspect of the false beards combined with a skilful use of irony is as innovatory as the style of FEMEN’s appearances: bare breasts, slogans written on the body, and a deliberately aggressive appearance which contrasts sharply with their wearing a garland of flowers in typically Ukrainian style. Secondly, in both cases, use is made of a staging of physical attributes characteristic of one of the two sexes and the social constructions which surround them - beards for masculinity, breasts for femininity. Our supposition is that this performative characteristic of imaging or translating into pictures makes a significant difference compared with activism based solely on spoken or written discourse. Thirdly, in the public appearances which characterize the modes of action employed by both associations, it is only women who are staged (even if men may also have a certain role behind the scenes<sup>4</sup>).

The central hypothesis of this paper is that the ‘imaged performance’ component of the protests potentially strengthens their effects in terms of the empowerment of the activists involved. This empowerment is supposed to be the impact of a learning process triggered by these forms of staged activism. Analysis of the learning has been based on

the available literature and other journalistic and video sources<sup>5</sup>. For La Barbe, in 2013 we could undertake an online survey<sup>6</sup> of members of La Barbe, mainly in Bordeaux. When it came to the perceptions of FEMEN members, attempts to make contact were inconclusive and it was not possible to carry out a survey. Echoing the widespread media cover of FEMEN, a significant corpus of literature has emerged about them, with additional video reports and press articles. The internet sites of both movements<sup>7</sup> are also very rich sources of material, with archives which include photos and videos as well as diverse written material. Based on this, we have analyzed various stages in the action process: the way the networks are organized, public appearances with their preparatory stages, and how they are accounted for and evaluated. This research process has been inspired by feminist research methods, theorized by Harding (1987) among others, and we have devoted significant attention to reflexivity, particularly in the exchanges with members of La Barbe.

### **Caricatural and ironic staging: the Bearded Ladies**

Created in reaction to the sexist character of media coverage of Ségolène Royal's campaign in the French Presidential Elections, La Barbe was set up in 2008. The point of departure is women conspicuously wearing beards to denounce male domination exercised through persistent inequalities in power.

The survey of La Barbe members aimed to detect traces of informal, transformative learning associated with the notion of empowerment related to four types of power (Williams, 1994; Oxaal, Baden, 1997): During the activist process, which types of power are most often acquired or strengthened for the activists? Do the collective dimension and organizational modes of governance promote individual empowerment? In order to understand as well as possible the learning effect in terms of the empowerment of La Barbe movement activists, it is first necessary to unravel the process through which the movement acts as well as its structure. Secondly, analysis will focus on those elements of the activist process which are favourable to empowerment. This part will draw upon, among other aspects, an analysis of the results of the survey mentioned above.

The process by which La Barbe engages in action has three phases, to look at it schematically: Once the choice and decision to take action have been made collegially, the first stage begins. This is the time for writing a pamphlet which "is one of the key points in La Barbe actions: in 1,500 signs, the sexist nature of the event 'to be bearded'<sup>8</sup> should be pointed out and denounced in an entirely ironic way" (La Barbe, 2014, p.17). Drafting the pamphlet is organized collectively in a back and forth way between group members, starting from a first draft written after an information search about the event to be bearded in order to denounce a manifestly unjust situation. Several versions succeed one another until the tract designed to justify intervention by the group is finalised. Next, during the event and after activists have slipped into the venue, it is time to get up on stage and read out the pamphlet: "one woman, two women, or several women stand up, emerge from the attentively passive audience and approach the rostrum" (La Barbe 2014, p.16). This is when the activists move into action, rapidly putting on their beards, crossing an invisible obstacle, that of moving into the space where women are "invisibilized", this space where they take their place without anyone offering it to them. This is meant to be a symbolic allocation of power by taking a stand physically within the space and through the play of bodily posture. At this point one of the bearded activists, designated in advance, takes the role of reading out loud the pamphlet in order to bring the contents before her "peers" (the majority of men in the venue) with or without a microphone before



an audience more or less “receptive” to the ironic denunciation<sup>9</sup> of inequalities. The pamphlet may be handed out during or after the reading inside the premises where the event takes place or somewhere close by outside. Finally, the action and its purpose is given a high profile through a video clip, a press release (media outlets will have previously been alerted to ensure that the actions are covered) and through social networks<sup>10</sup>. In addition, the actions are publicized through video clips on the La Barbe site as well as films by the director Harriet Hirshorn, which can be seen on YouTube. In these video clips, the form of narration through images and sound appropriate to the ironic denunciation is important: The aesthetic is that of the silent movies: silent scenes of action accompanied by pompous or dated music, and shown alternating with white caption cards against a black background which echo the ironic congratulations and hurrahs in the action. This reference to the early years of cinema expand on the ‘very 19th century’ aspect of the false beard (Vernet, 2011).

Through the diversity of the activities, and the various aspects of the approach to the process described, we supposed that every phase of the actions may potentially be a catalyst for learning and transformation.

La Barbe deliberately seeks to favor the inclusion of each activist through horizontally-structured organization of activities. The purpose is that each person can take part throughout the links in the chain of action: from monitoring events to be potentially bearded to making the most of the actions and drawing upon the informal networking, bearing in mind that the pamphlet is the core of the activists’ action, and that it requires a humorous handling of discourse.

The limits of this democratic involvement of activists are stressed by Alix Béranger:

[...] our activist tools, the written and spoken work, are instruments of domination which we turn around to our benefit. Pamphlets are central to our activity: we write them collectively, but we are very aware that it is always the same women who make the first draft. Some activists step back, “letting others do the writing”. What needs to be done, what do we want to pass on? These reflections take place internally, there are no simple answers. (Bard, Béranger & Carbutar, 2013, p.78).

As regards the staged aspect, “false beards” may give an impression of disguise, as if the idea of the feminist purpose of the action would be difficult to acknowledge openly. In fact, beards are above all the

[...] ultimate virile attribute, (they) can be used by us to get rid of the feminine within us [...]. Worn during our actions, they are intended to bring out the outdated and reactionary nature of these homogenous assemblies of men in gray suits. The idea is to make sexism and male coopting look naff and outdated. (Bard, Béranger & Carbutar, 2013, p.70).

Wearing a false beard is a founding act of group belonging and is explicitly presented as such by some of La Barbés’ core group. They claim that it generates learning potential in terms of strengthening empowerment:

La Barbe is a catalyst for the empowerment of the women who take part in it. By getting up on stage without being invited, by grabbing a mike which has not been offered to them, by reading out loud a text denouncing a flagrant injustice, they also change the relationship with their voice and their power over reality and their own life. (La Barbe, 2014, p.26).

These elements drawn from publications by La Barbe and literature about them also find support from the results of the survey carried out amongst the La Barbe members in Bordeaux. Of the fourteen respondents, thirteen clearly stated that their activities with La

Barbe have caused them to learn things. Responses to the open question which asked them to describe the nature of this learning vary greatly. To highlight various types of learning described in the responses, we mobilized the four types of “power” in the breakdown of empowerment (Rowlands, 1995; Oxaal and Baden, 1997): power over, power to, power within, and power with.

Eleven of the thirteen respondents mentioned points linked to “power within”: self-confidence, self-assurance, assertiveness, awareness (in the sense of “coming to realize that”, triggering off a turning point).

The same number of responses concern various forms of “power to”, above all regarding activities within the public space: speaking out, positioning within the public space, the ability to stand up for one’s ideas and one’s rights, motivational skills, quick-wittedness, and stress management. According to some responses, this learning subsequently had some impact on respondents’ professional life. Other items in this “power to” category are linked more to technical skills, such as communication, media relations, social networking, and logistics. Various other responses linked to “power to” concern awareness (driven by increased knowledge), capacity for analysis and for structuring thinking, information monitoring, vigilance, and a sense of realism.

As regards the collective dimension of empowerment, “power with”, there were also several significant responses: practising collective action, co-construction, solidarity/sorority, and circulating information.

In connection with “power over”, survey respondents mentioned learning referring to efforts to free oneself from the power of male domination: interrupting older men, resisting security personnel, taking the floor without authorization, continuing to read out a pamphlet despite hostile reactions. The term empowerment was also specifically mentioned on one occasion.

Only one female activist out of fourteen said she did not feel she had learned anything significant while campaigning with La Barbe. She explained this by her large amount of previous experience of community activism using similar mechanisms as La Barbe.

Since the focus of this research study was on identifying those components of the activism process which might have the greatest potential for informal learning in terms of empowerment, one of the survey questions aimed to discover the activists’ perception of which phase of involvement with La Barbe might be the most productive in terms of learning:

- Ten respondents out of fourteen mentioned the phase of the action within the public space, nine of which in combination with preparation and/or meetings and the phase following the event (communication afterwards); among these responses, five particularly mentioned reading the pamphlet out loud during the action.
- In addition to the importance attributed to the process as a whole (combination of “meetings + actions”), we note several positive remarks about the contribution made specifically by preparation meetings and post-action debriefings.
- The exchanges by mail and social networks and certain additional activities (“punk dinners” in Paris) were also mentioned as being formative.

If we consider the results of the survey and the literature, the formative effect of campaigning with La Barbe is indisputable. This informal learning through activist campaigning can be explained by two factors: on one hand, La Barbe’s very participatory mode of action throughout the process of “public appearances” enables each

member involved to take ownership of this process, giving them more confidence in themselves as well as organizational, logistical and technical learning. On the other hand, the aspect represented by women's physically imposing themselves uninvited within a public space, and even more their speaking out in this very unwelcoming if not hostile context, strengthens these women's power within, the more so if they are novices at this type of provocative activism.

### **Bare breasts, slogans and garlands of flowers: FEMEN's protesting nudity**

In the absence of any direct contact with the members of FEMEN, this part of the study is based on a number of articles responding to this "new form of feminism", together with the Femen manifesto and a several hundred-page long account published with the help of a journalist (FEMEN, 2013) as well as a number of videos and films. It nevertheless remains difficult to analyze their actions stage by stage from the perspective of their effects in terms of learning and empowerment, which limits the comparability of our results with those for La Barbe. We shall concentrate on three aspects: FEMEN's mode of action taken overall, the training which is offered to new members and the mode of governance within the movement.

The mode of action adopted by FEMEN women is known through the large amount of media coverage which their public appearances have generated, as well as from the literature mentioned here. In their manifesto, FEMEN members term themselves "an international movement of courageous topless activists with bodies covered with slogans and heads garlanded with flowers" (FEMEN, 2015, p.24). Founded in 2008 in Ukraine, it is now an international movement with a "headquarter" which also serves as a "training center" in Paris. The small group of Ukrainian activists originally emerged from a reading and political debate circle. According to the accounts given, the desire for activism at that point took precedence over clear and precise ideas of the problems to be denounced:

They were trying to find themselves. Against what should they protest? How should they find targets? During one of their brainstorming sessions, they found their first major subject: Ukraine is not a brothel. They spoke out against both the flourishing sex industry within the country, overseen by the authorities, and against the perception that Westerners have of Ukrainian women, "Natashas" ready to fall into the arms of a Prince Charming for a scrap of bread or the promise of a dolce vita abroad (FEMEN, 2013 p. 18).

Media impact was a key objective which they learned to achieve through "shows" or spectacle. (FEMEN, 2013 p. 59). Baring breasts was not tried out until 2009 when it was immediately effective in achieving broad media coverage.

From one action to the next, the FEMEN developed a mode of operation which they termed "sextremism" and which drew upon the resources of theatrical performance. Their actions, costumed and picturesque with an "innocent and childlike" look (FEMEN, 2013 p. 59) to begin with, gradually evolved towards public appearances which deliberately played on a certain apparent contradiction in the representations they offered: the bare breasts which might evoke objectified women were covered with punchy, radical slogans, the garland of flowers taken from Ukrainian folklore in contrast to the deliberate aggressiveness manifested by yelling slogans and a bodily attitude (for example the raised fist) with combative face pulling, described by leading members as "warlike".

Marie-Joseph Bertini (2014, p.22) analyses FEMEN's socio-technical communication devices in these terms:

Femen does not respond to the alienation of women's bodies by the Women's Liberation Movement's body-for-oneself or the body-for-enjoyment, but the body-for-war, hardened and toughened, in a sacrificial gesture very much present as a background to their discourse. Except that this body is paradoxically naked, and how could nudity be a weapon when it gestures towards what is most vulnerable in each human being?

For FEMEN members, there is no contradiction, but nudity is seen as the only way to get the attention of the agents of male domination, of provoking them<sup>11</sup>. Bertini interprets this apparent tension not as a desexualization of the female body, but as an instrumentalization of female sexuality in the service of women's liberation:

Opposing the controlling forces of the economy, the market and the social order which underlies and legitimizes them is the compound effect of the uncontrolled forces of competent, connected individuals, ready to reject what they are, in the Foucauldian sense of the term, in other words ready to escape the pitfalls of their condition. (Bertini 2014, p.34)

There has been much questioning and even criticism of the nature of "Femen-style" feminism (e.g. Mona Chollet in her article "FEMEN everywhere, Feminism nowhere" ("Femen partout, féminisme nulle part") published in *Le monde diplomatique* in March 2013), on the grounds of "first degree naivety" and a lack of political culture. There is also a noticeably essentialist posture ("...women are stronger and tougher, because they have the maternal instinct and a sense of duty", FEMEN, 2013, p. 76) which does not command unanimity amongst feminists. The founding members also claim to be above all "practitioners" (Ibid, p. 141). Bertini stresses the absence of any political culture and draws attention to the nature of their political lexicon, partly taken from pre-Soviet discourse ("propaganda for the new female sexuality" should act in favor of "its great [international] revolutionary mission" to "inoculate modern women with a culture of active resistance"...), or even resembling that of Islamic jihad: "creating the most influential and combat-ready community in the world", a claim for the need for a "female jihad against male domination", reference to a "topless jihad", defining the mode of action as a form of "peaceful terrorism". These terms form part of a register of heroics or even of the sacrificial gesture (Bertini, 2014, p.22). For this same author, FEMEN's texts (particularly the Manifesto and the FEMEN book) are halfway between parody and sincere conviction and the question of irony or sarcasm in FEMEN's rhetoric remains an open one, if we also take account of their liking for the culture of performance and for stunts, (Bertini, 2014, p. 26-27) reminiscent of a skillful marketing strategy<sup>12</sup>.

Frequently, their public appearances end with interventions by the police or security guards who attempt to cover the naked torsos and extract the 'sextremists' (as they term themselves) from the public places where they stage their protests. These interventions are often quite violent, amongst others also in reaction to the acts of resistance which the activists deploy deliberately. Videos of these appearances as well as the broader media coverage include these often spectacular scenes of evacuation. Marie-Joseph Bertini terms this mode of action *high-tension socio-technical communication operations* (Bertini, 2014, p. 26-27).

In contrast to La Barbe, FEMEN members offer training and 'training camps' to new members in order to transmit the skills required for the FEMEN mode of action, which the self-taught founders have acquired through experience<sup>13</sup>. For them, training is a central aspect: "the number of recruits is an indicator of our professionalism" (FEMEN, 2013, p. 174). The narrative of these training courses is characterized by quasi-military language: experienced members try to toughen up new activists, training them in "close-

quarter confrontation techniques”, seeking to rid them of their inhibitions and transform them into “warriors for the revolution” (FEMEN, 2013, p. 254-256):

I ask the girls to yell out loud ... it's rare for them to manage this at the first go. Most of them are not capable of yelling out loud, they snigger and look away. This means they are not sure about what they are doing, that they haven't got the charge of aggressiveness and hatred of our enemies like we have in Ukraine. For some of them, it's a game (FEMEN, 2013, p.243).

FEMEN members set out to train activists physically and psychologically to make them “ready to carry out humanist tasks of any degree of complexity and provocation” (FEMEN, 2013, p.8). Central themes of training are: postures, aggressive appearance, self-defence, physical fitness, reactions to intimidation, physical aggression or questioning or arrest by the police<sup>14</sup>. The contribution in terms of learning activism is thus explicitly thought of as a preliminary to active militancy (which is to say participation in public appearances). The skills judged necessary are thus acquired in a formal, specific setting and not “by doing” as within La Barbe.

In addition to this formal learning, we can assume that informal learning takes place: The effect in terms of empowerment of the act of stripping off in public is very much linked to the perception the individual has of her body and her “beauty” (understood as the degree of perceived conformity with the type of female body which is most often given media coverage)<sup>15</sup>. Activists learn to overcome inhibition, fear and sometimes also complexes about their body. This empowerment—the result of stretching beyond an “internal struggle”—is produced as an outcome of formal training but also through the experience of participating in performances. The transformative effect of an act of this nature is also linked to its consequences: one of the founders declares that her first topless appearance was “a decisive moment in her internal liberation, but also of breaking with a part of her family” (FEMEN; 2013, p. 115).

The mode of governance within FEMEN is another central aspect of the formative effects of this militancy. Their organizational mode is little discussed in the publications. In the Manifesto, the hard core of FEMEN (the Ukrainian founders who set up the movement in Paris and a few others) talk of the “essential respect for the democratic process which we impose on ourselves” (FEMEN, 2015, p 54). But more implicitly, between the lines of the accounts given in the publications, there emerges a somewhat vertical form of organization within this movement. It is directed by a coordinating council comprising the movement's founders and its most experienced activists (FEMEN, 2013, p. 12): “each group will carry out actions to respond to local situations, but the general impetus will come from Paris” (FEMEN, 2013, p. 258). The language used is also an indicator: there is talk of training “female soldiers” or “legionaries” of feminism who must comply with “discipline”. Certain potentially formative tasks remain strongly centralized or at least carried out by only a small number of members: all the practical and logistical preparation of public appearances, which are minutely planned, the conception of slogans and press releases, media relations, the distribution of the various roles within the group during actions, etc. Since these tasks are very much concentrated among a few, learning the corresponding skills is supposedly largely confined within this small group.

To summarize this analyses based solely on secondary data, there is no doubt that FEMEN's mode of action as such requires learning and has significant learning effects. This evidence is confirmed by the existence of a training center for new members. The concurring testimonies available in videos and articles are highlighting the empowering effect of participating in FEMEN's actions. According to the four types of power, we can

assume that the power within is most enhanced. As FEMEN's actions are potentially risky, physically and regarding other consequences (police arrest, media coverage of ones' exposed body, etc.), to sum up ones' courage to participate seems clearly related to this form of interior power. Prepared by the formal learning during the training, we can assume that the members experience the participation as such a process of informal learning as well. Given the mode of governance within the movement and the centralization of the organization of actions, the skills deployed are concentrated in a few hands and not largely transmitted, leaving supposedly relatively lower impact in terms of "power to". However, the efficiency of this vertical organization can potentially strengthen the learning effect in terms of "power with", as far as the consciousness of and confidence in collective action is concerned. Future collection of primary data amongst FEMEN members will allow to refine these findings and deepen the understanding of the underlying learning mechanisms and their empowering effects.

## Conclusion

To conclude this comparison of two feminist movements which make use of gendered image representations, very significant learning effects can be claimed for the activists in both movements, especially for novices and for less experienced activists. The transformative learning which may be produced by these experiences of activism and the empowerment which may result are generated in different ways, as can be seen from the contrast between the irony used by La Barbe which makes use of a humorous register to ridicule opponents and the aggressiveness advocated by FEMEN ("we are a radical movement, not funny at all", FEMEN, 2013, p.243). In both cases, the staging at the heart of the mode of action requires a certain going beyond one's limits with significant potential for transformation: while putting on a false beard seems relatively less daring than showing oneself with bared breasts, the point these have in common is the need to assert oneself, and to move into a public space a priori hostile to the presence of these activists. Most evidently, the potential consequences for the activists' professional and private spheres are much more considerable for FEMEN members and their mode of action by all appearances gives rise to more violent opposition. It may be supposed that the extent of the learning effect depends on the actual risks taken: The potential for formal learning from the FEMEN training courses combined with the informal learning which derives from the experience of public appearances seems more transformative than the Barbues' informal learning, even if the latter remains clearly significant.

However, activism with La Barbe takes place within horizontal structures where co-construction, the sharing of responsibilities and collective reflection are common practice. In contrast to the organizational mode of the FEMEN group, this horizontal mode of governance within La Barbe is a source of additional informal learning which is at the heart of the notion of empowerment: the linkage between the collective and individual dimensions, between "power with" and "power to" and "power within". The transformative effect of this learning within La Barbe (of which its members are not always aware) is doubtless more subtle and may be slower than for FEMEN activists. For FEMEN members, the empowerment which is the effect of their (formal and informal) learning is supposedly more rapid and—just like the FEMEN movement—more radical. The question of how activists in both movements might carry over more empowerment into the other areas of their life—whether professional, private, or intimate—remains open and deserves to be explored further.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Catherine André co-conducted the research about La Barbe and is the co-author of the publication presenting the results: André, Catherine, Hofmann, Elisabeth, “Bearded women: feminist activism in 'La Barbe' as a form of informal adult learning”, in: Joanna Ostroch-Kamińska, Cristina C. Vieira, “Private World(s). Gender and Informal Learning of Adults”, ESREA Series “Research on the Education and Learning of Adults”, Sense Publishers, Pays Bas, 2015. She has contributed to this article in revisiting the La Barbe research in view of the comparison with Femen.

<sup>2</sup> In France, the validation for certification purposes of experiential learning acquired from the experience of volunteering (for example in procedures for obtaining a university degree on the basis of validation of experiential learning) has been formally acknowledged since the start of the 2000s (<http://www.vae.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/d15.pdf> (in French: accessed 12/9/16). Translations from French sources are our own unless stated otherwise).

<sup>3</sup> Using the term “movement” to describe these two feminist groups is questionable. Bereni and Revillard (2012, p.5) define feminist movements “as collective movements led mainly by women, based on their gender (women’s movements) and/or challenging the socially-established gender hierarchy between sexes (feminist movements)”. According to Goertz and Mazur (2008, p. 226), the term “women’s movement” refers to “collective action by women explicitly organized as women presenting claims in public life based on women’s gendered identities”. In a reedition of an AWID publication about feminist movements (Batliwala 2013, p. 6) a list of criteria characterizing a feminist movement is proposed, including that of a critical mass of members. This criterion is not met by La Barbe and FEMEN. The two organizations have just a few hundred members in France. The criterion of “‘feminist’ governance and modes of operation (inclusiveness, transparency, problematization of distribution of power, etc.,)” may also prove to be difficult to verify for FEMEN, as will be noted in the final part of this paper. In the absence of a more accurate term, we shall nevertheless use the term “movement” to designate La Barbe and Femen, interchangeably with that of association, which here designates a *de facto* rather than a *de jure* association, since in both cases the activists are not acting on behalf of an association formally created under the terms of the 1901 law regulating associations in France.

<sup>4</sup> The La Barbe association has no formal existence with a view to avoiding legal proceedings, but we may consider that the activists form a *de facto* association which is not gender-mixed. There is a second association, the “Friends of La Barbe” (“Les ami-e-s de la Barbe”), which has been formalized with statutes in accordance with the 1901 law and where men are members. In the literature on Femen, the significant impact of a male ‘mentor’ during the first years of the movement’s existence is frequently mentioned in Femen’s publications, as well as collaboration with men and women ‘allies’ to meet the logistical demands of the activists’ appearances.

<sup>5</sup> The analyses considered documents or other sources available up until September 2015. More recent publications have not been taken into account.

<sup>6</sup> The form of an online survey has been chosen in order to take into account on the one hand, the personal and reflexive nature of the questions and on the other hand, the personal interconnection through the collaborator, herself a member of the group. The anonymous online form seemed the best compromise to strike the balance between motivating the La Barbe members to answer the complex questions (through an e-mail of their co-member) and at the same time keeping a certain distance through the online form. The main questions were of qualitative nature and the members took on average half an hour to fill in the form.

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.labarbelabarbe.org/La\\_Barbe/Accueil.html](http://www.labarbelabarbe.org/La_Barbe/Accueil.html) (see also the La Barbe Facebook page which is more up to date); <http://femen.org/fr>.

<sup>8</sup> This neologism is used within La Barbe to designate the fact of appearing with false beards at a given event.

<sup>9</sup> For example, by “congratulating” the obvious resistance against gender equality.

<sup>10</sup> Facebook: 8612 likes; Twitter account: 6577 followers (August 2015).

<sup>11</sup> Aitkenhead Decca, “Femen leader Inna Shevchenko: ‘I’m for any form of feminism’“. Interview with Inna Shevchenko. *The Guardian*, Friday 8 November 2013. Cited by Mona Chollet, “Femen partout, féminisme nulle part”, *Le monde diplomatique*, 12 March 2013.

<sup>12</sup> It is also noteworthy that FEMEN members have developed a series of products (especially clothing) for sale to promote their actions. On their site (September 2015) at the top of the screen, and very prominent, could be seen the words “Support your ideology – buy riot clothing on FEMEN shop” (NB: they refer to the ideology of the potential buyer, not their own!).

<sup>13</sup> Their own histories as activists (described in the publication FEMEN, 2013, op. cit.) are convincing testimony of transformative learning and empowerment in the course of preparing for activism.

<sup>14</sup> There have already been arrests and convictions, not only in Ukraine but also in France and Germany, for “sexual exhibition”. The Ukrainian historical members of Femen remark that French activists are not ready to go to prison, that they are not “professional revolutionaries like us” (FEMEN, 2013, op. cit., p. 243.)

<sup>15</sup> This aspect is described in the account given by one of the founders (FEMEN, 2013, op. cit., p. 114): “*I was telling myself, My God, I'm going to shame our organization. I have the chest of a boy... How horrible!*” It is in fact noticeable that most FEMEN members in the available photos and videos are young and have bodies similar to those of models in the media, which strengthens the idea that undressing in public is an act which requires great effort on the part of women, linked amongst other factors to the relationship with their body and to its subjectively “perceived conformity”. In their book, Femen activists explain: “*We are criticized for practicing inverse sexism. This isn't completely untrue. Our girls must be fit enough to endure difficult tests and beautiful in order to make good use of their body. To sum up, Femen embodies the image of a new woman: beautiful, active and totally free.*” (FEMEN, 2013, op. cit., p. 266)

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