

# Of the transformation of sensitive experience into inter-subjective experience

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The route of Carol White, the heroine of the film *Safe* made in 1995 by Todd Haynes, although stylised, is not very different from the route of those whose bodies undergo a true ordeal by the air they breathe, or at least in the way they describe it. The film reveals this process which starts with perceptions and subjective experience. A process which in turn leads to an ordeal for the environment in order to understand the how and why of these experiences, but also to make it shareable, comprehensible to others. Finally, a process which also leads to the emergence of conflicts, either inter-individual or collective, close to controversy or ordinary discussion and which sometimes causes mobilisation in collective dynamics.

The use of tetrachloroethylene in dry cleaning, the “multiple chemical hypersensitivity syndrome” and industrial pollution in the Etang de Berre area are three sanitary and environmental problems in which the quality of the air is involved. In these three cases, the issue of the disputes is to demonstrate that the discomfort or physiological pains are partly caused by environmental pollution and particularly air pollution. However, these three cases have followed different routes. Whilst the use of tetrachloroethylene has been banned in new dry cleaners' shops in the United States since 2006 and in France since 24 April 2012, the “multiple chemical hypersensitivity syndrome” is still not really mobilising the masses. Finally if air pollution around the Etang de Berre is a recognized environmental problem and its effect on health still generates much controversy, it does not appear as the main problem. These different routes questions the conditions which foster or not the transformation of individual experience into inter-subjective experience via the constitution of a public problem. How can one go from perception to discussion, from intentional objectives to collective attention ? Once the problems have become public, how can one understand the variation in the degrees of attention between these problems ?

In an article of 1987, Ernan McMullin<sup>1</sup> distinguishes between controversies depending on the type of object at the centre of the discussions. He thus differentiates between factual controversies, methodological controversies and theoretical controversies. On this point we find Marcelo Dascal's triptych of “discussion, controversy, dispute”. In each of the typologies formulated by these two authors, we find the idea that possibility of rational resolution of the conflict disappears as the authors move away from a common definition of the object discussed. Without completing adopting their typologies, I will attempt to distinguish between *epistemic conflict* and *axiological conflict*<sup>2</sup>. I will then show that the way in which these two

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<sup>1</sup> Ernan McMullin, “Scientific controversy and its termination”, in H. Tristram Engelhardt and Arthur L. Caplan (eds.), *Scientific controversies. Case studies in the resolution and closure of dispute in science and technology*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987, p; 49-91

<sup>2</sup> Two individuals A and B discuss the object X. If A and B discuss the data they have about X (size, weight, colour, etc.) and the methods used to obtain it, then it is an epistemic conflict. If A and B put questions about the values and principles attached to X at the heart of the discussion, then they are engaged in an axiological conflict. See Francis Chateauraynard, *Argumenter dans un champs de forces. Essai de balistique sociologique*, Paris, Petra, 2011, p. 104-105.

*forms of conflict* are expressed makes it possible to apprehend the degree to which a problem is shared.

The form of conflicts<sup>3</sup> is determined by the type of arguments exchanged but also by the “disposition” of the actors, or in other words, both by the geographical and social space in which the conflict is expressed. Ernan McMullin considers that a scientific controversy does not truly exist unless there is an argumentative exchange between at least two scientists and this disagreement is made public<sup>4</sup>. We can accept the first part, considering that generally speaking, for a conflict to exist, it involves an exchange of arguments and counter-arguments around a common problem and that attention of several actors is concentrated on the same object. I now put forward the hypothesis that the density of the relations forming the space of conflict (to use the terms of the analysis of social networks) constitutes a second marker to describe the level of sharing of a problem. Thus the more the arguments are concentrated around a unique object, the more the actors of the conflict share a common problem.

The definition of air as being polluted results from the operations of assimilation<sup>5</sup> made by the “local residents”, by “the sick”, by “militants” or by “experts”. In order to render air pollution tangible, it seems necessary for the actors (from the “local resident” to the “expert”) to cross their perception of the “incongruous” elements (odours, smoke, dust), the presence of pollutant substances and the “incrimination”<sup>6</sup> of one or more acts. These operations bring about an “objectivization” of the experience of each. Personal intuition becomes a collective interrogation and a common testing of the air quality. Like “money” for Simmel<sup>7</sup>, the data obtained by measures make it possible to re-centre the discussions around a common object. Finally, this process of objectivization is marked by the “incrimination” of actors thus causing a “common opponent” to emerge and with him, the possibility of conflict. In this way in a particular form we find the “perceive, measure and discuss’ triptych. It is through these operations of bringing together that I will attempt to understand the differences concerning the routes of tetrachloroethylene, the “multiple chemical hypersensitivity syndrome” and pollution of the Etang de Berre.

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<sup>3</sup> Here we must apprehend the notion of form with a Simmelian vision. Georg Simmel, *Sociologies. Etude des formes de socialisation*, Paris, PUF, 1999.

<sup>4</sup> Ernan McMullin, « Scientific controversy and its termination », op. cit., p. 52.

<sup>5</sup> Francis Chateauraynaud, *Argumenter dans un champs de forces. Essai de balistique sociologique*, op. cit., p. 261.

<sup>6</sup> Madeleine Akrich, Yannick Barthe, Catherine Rémy, “Les enquêtes “profanes” et la dynamique des controverses” , in Madeleine Akrich, Yannick Barthe, Catherine Rémy (eds.), *Sur la piste environnementale. Menaces sanitaires et mobilisations profanes*, Paris, Presse des Mines, 2010, p.7-52.

<sup>7</sup> Georg Simmel, *Philosophie de l’argent*, Paris, PUF, 2007.