

An unlikely mobilization : the occupation of Saint-Nizier church by the prostitutes of Lyon

In: *Revue française de sociologie*. 2001, 42-1. pp. 107-131.

Abstract

This article examines the conditions under which, in June 1975, a marginalized, stigmatized population -the prostitutes of the French city of Lyon- took the step of collective action, occupying a church for more than a week to protest against police repression. It highlights the difficulties these politically inexperienced women encountered in mobilizing, namely preventing defections and choosing an appropriate mode of action ; difficulties they were able to surmount thanks to resources provided by outside supporters endowed with practical knowledge in matters of collective action (activists in a group with close ties to the broad movement known as catholicisme social and feminists). Despite this assistance, however, the prostitutes' mobilization quickly declined and soon expired, in part because of the leaders' defection.

Citer ce document / Cite this document :

Mathieu Lilian. An unlikely mobilization : the occupation of Saint-Nizier church by the prostitutes of Lyon. In: *Revue française de sociologie*. 2001, 42-1. pp. 107-131.

http://www.persee.fr/web/revues/home/prescript/article/rfsoc_0035-2969_2001_sup_42_1_5416

Lilian MATHIEU

An Unlikely Mobilization: the Occupation of Saint-Nizier Church by the Prostitutes of Lyon*

ABSTRACT

This article examines the conditions under which, in June 1975, a marginalized, stigmatized population –the prostitutes of the French city of Lyon– took the step of collective action, occupying a church for more than a week to protest against police repression. It highlights the difficulties these politically inexperienced women encountered in mobilizing, namely preventing defections and choosing an appropriate mode of action; difficulties they were able to surmount thanks to resources provided by outside supporters endowed with practical knowledge in matters of collective action (activists in a group with close ties to the broad movement known as *catholicisme social*⁽¹⁾ and feminists). Despite this assistance, however, the prostitutes' mobilization quickly declined and soon expired, in part because of the leaders' defection.

On the morning of Monday, June 2, 1975, approximately 100 prostitutes moved into the church of Saint-Nizier, in the center of Lyon. Brought there by their leader, Ulla, they declared they would not leave until the prison sentences that approximately ten of them had received a few days earlier, for the repeated offense of active soliciting, were lifted. In more general terms their action was meant as a protest against the repressive policy being implemented against them in the form of repeated citations for "*attitude de nature à provoquer la débauche*" [bearing and behavior of the sort that provoke debauchery] (article R 34 of the French penal code). They remained inside the church for more than a week, quickly becoming a center of local, then national, media attention. The prostitutes of Lyon received support from a range of political and union organizations. Their protest, which had meanwhile been

* My thanks to François Chazel for his critical comments on an earlier version of this text.

(1) *Catholicisme social* came into being in the late nineteenth century in response to the conviction among a segment of French Catholics that the Church needed to be adapted to the realities of modern society. Often politically progressive, *catholiques sociaux* have

also been concerned to resist materialism, understood to be promoted by socialism as well as economic liberalism. They have worked, and are still working, to anchor the Christian message in social and economic life, specifically through labor unionism, youth movements, and associations to assist the underprivileged and disadvantaged.

taken up by prostitutes in several other French cities, came abruptly to an end at dawn on June 10, when they were forcibly evicted by the police. None of the members of government they had requested to see had agreed to their demand to negotiate. For the first time, however, women belonging to one of the most marginalized and stigmatized categories of society had dared to unite against police repression and interpellate the government with a publicly presented list of grievances and demands.

Though the "revolt" of the prostitutes of Lyon was a spectacular event in its time and though memory of it remains fairly vivid to this day, it has most often been perceived as a kind of political incongruity. I shall try to demonstrate here that such a movement is not of mere anecdotal interest but raises a number of serious questions for the sociology of collective action. One of the most important of these –and my particular focus here– is what the necessary conditions are for mobilization of a group as unorganized and lacking in protest tradition and means for action as prostitutes. Investigating the problem thus posed implies choosing an appropriate theoretical approach, and of the many models available today for analyzing collective action,⁽²⁾ I shall be making special use in this work of the longstanding one known as "resource mobilization".⁽³⁾ By paying particular attention to the practical conditions enabling social movements to emerge and the organizational forms those movements take, the different authors who use this approach have performed the useful service of freeing protest actions from the "obviousness" or "transparency" that common interpretations, exclusively focused on "causes" or "meaning", tend to attribute to them, underlining instead all that is complex and uncertain in the mobilizing of populations ordinarily excluded from the institutional political game, specifically in matters of choosing an appropriate mode of action, assembling a significant number of activist participants, and forming alliances. From this perspective, applying a resource mobilization approach to a movement as unlikely as one begun by prostitutes can also be understood as a kind of empirical test: because prostitutes –marginalized, working clandestinely, politically non-competent and inexperienced– seem particularly unfit for collective action and therefore represent a kind of borderline case, the study of a collective action movement that managed, despite all these obstacles, to develop among prostitutes could enable us to delimit the relevance and field of valid application of a conceptual apparatus developed from observation of more classic or ordinary protest movements.

Another important aspect of the approach adopted here should also be mentioned. Though the case study, aimed at drawing a kind of general understanding or lesson from the analysis of a unique object, is much used in specialized social science fields, it has not generally been well regarded by analysts of collective action. For many years they have turned instead to broad-scope,

(2) Overviews of the different contemporary approaches to the analysis of social movements include Mann (1991), Chazel (1992), Fillieule and Péchu (1993), and Neveu (1996).

(3) The most important –and today classic– theoretical works in this current are Gamson (1990), McCarthy and Zald (1977), Tilly (1978), and Oberschall (1973).

longitudinal studies, seeking by means of a concept such as “the structure of political opportunities” to identify the structural and contextual factors favorable to the occurrence of protest waves.⁽⁴⁾ In direct contrast to this macrosociological approach, usually based on quantitative analysis of all movements to occur in a given country over a given period, I have chosen to adopt a tighter, “focal” analysis, necessarily more attentive to the practical conditions in which a single social movement appeared and developed. By coming closer to a microsociological level of analysis, or at least to the perceptions, calculations, and actual practices of the actors, their interactions with partners and opponents, and the different concrete situational logics with which they are confronted, I hope to have acceded to the means of reconstructing the logic of this instance of (collective) action in its unfolding, without renouncing the ambition of drawing a few general lessons on the conditions for mobilization of populations who seem *a priori* politically illegitimate or non-competent.⁽⁵⁾

Genesis of the mobilization

An unencouraging precedent

Though by far the more spectacular and renowned, the Lyon prostitutes’ occupation of Saint-Nizier was not their first collective action. Three years earlier they had been involved in an aborted demonstration, the unpleasant memory of which would weigh heavily on their tactical choices when, in June 1975, they decided to act again. This first attempt at mobilization deserves mention, first because it represents a significant phase in the development of a protest dynamic that ultimately resulted in occupation of the church; second because it provides a kind of active demonstration of the political domination that prostitutes are subject to and the common judgment of them as politically illegitimate.

In August 1972, the prostitution market in Lyon was rocked by a scandal involving several local policemen and politicians. Following a series of anonymous denunciations, the illicit activities of a number of police officers on the “*mœurs*” brigade [vice squad] were publicly revealed and the accused speedily charged and jailed. The officers –French civil servants, it should be remembered– were accused of receiving “envelopes” from managers of hotels used by prostitutes in exchange for police “protection”, and even, in some

(4) Among the many studies using this approach we can cite McAdam (1982), Tarrow (1989), Duyvendak (1994), and Fillieule (1997).

(5) The following analysis was initially presented in Mathieu (1998). It is based on interviews conducted with 17 persons (8 of

whom are prostitutes or former prostitutes), analysis of contemporaneous press coverage of the events, consultation of the archives of some of the protagonists (including letters, leaflets, minutes), and a study of published accounts written by the movement’s main leaders, particularly Barbara and Coninck (1977).

cases, of purchasing such establishments with the help of complicit real estate agents; others were revealed to be outright procurers collecting the earnings of prostitutes working directly for them. The affair also touched a number of local political figures linked to the *UDR*,⁽⁶⁾ who were suspected of ties to local organized crime (the “*milieu*”) and ensuring “protection” for the operators of Lyon’s *maisons closes* [brothels]. The parliament representative for the city’s fourth arrondissement was put in a particularly delicate spot by the discovery of his special connections to the keeper of a house for clandestine rendezvous, known to have an upscale clientele.

For the four hundred or so prostitutes practicing in the city at the time, the clean-up of relations between police and the “*milieu*” meant closure of the hotels they had been working in. Though such establishments were prohibited by law, there were a fair number of them in Lyon’s central red-light district in the early 1970s, and they were relatively prosperous. Often they were run by former prostitutes who took a cut from the women using the hotel. For the latter, the hotel arrangement had worked well: they enjoyed relative autonomy within the establishment used; were free to choose their hours and pace; payment for the room was clearly distinguished from payment for the trick (contrary to the situation in the *maisons closes*, where the client paid the operator an overall fee, of which the prostitute received only a percentage); and most important, hygiene and safety conditions were deemed satisfactory.

The hotel closures thus seriously upset the prostitutes’ practice and represented a threat to their safety; it was their discontent with this situation that led to their first attempt at collective action. On the evening of August 24, 1972, approximately forty women assembled for an informal meeting in the *Place des Jacobins* near the main red-light district. Despite their rapid dispersion by police, they managed to call a protest –in the form of a demonstration– for the next day. It was a dismal failure. At noon on August 25 in the same *Place des Jacobins* only about 30 prostitutes showed up; the others had no doubt been dissuaded by the fact that such a demonstration would require public affirmation of their status outside the narrow streets where they usually solicited. But more effective yet in handicapping the movement was the absence of any recognition of a right for prostitutes to use this mode of action to express discontent. The women planned to march on the prefecture to present their grievances. Their procession, announced by the local press in amused tones for the most part, attracted a crowd of curious onlookers gathered as if for a show. The prostitutes’ inexperience and clear inability to practice this form of action gave the police all they needed to make them a prime object of ridicule: the officers who had volunteered to lead a delegation of the demonstrators to a meeting with the prefect in fact led them to the central police station, where they were held in custody for several hours. Coverage in the local press also expressed a pervasive sense of the prostitutes’ illegitimacy, stigma-

(6) *UDR*: *Union des Démocrates pour la République*; Gaullist political party; victorious in the post-May ’68 elections; transformed in

1976 into the *RPR* (*Rassemblement pour la République*) by its leader, the current French president Jacques Chirac [Trans.].

tizing the demonstrators for how *maladroit* they were and ironizing about the vain, ridiculous pretention of wanting to make themselves heard “like anybody else”. The article published the next day in the main local daily underlined the “utter novelty” of the “spectacle” that the crowd of Lyon residents had witnessed and “wouldn’t have wanted to miss”.⁽⁷⁾ It also brought out the vanity of the prostitutes’ attempt to communicate with the population at large: it was, “of course, quite venturesome” of “these ladies” to try to explain their “little miseries”. Meanwhile, the caricature of the procurer was mobilized, as if to make the picture conform better to stereotypes while enabling the press to introduce the suspicion that the prostitutes’ demands were not well founded since the women were in all likelihood being “manipulated”: “Hats slanted over one eye, the *Jules* [pimps] took up the square formation, or, sitting in a car in a parking lot, surveyed the orthodoxy of the operation from a distance.”

The prostitutes’ attempt to use the practice of the street demonstration bears two paradoxical lessons for sociologists of collective action. While confirming that “[concerning collective action], we have arrived at the end of a long naturalization process” (Fillieule, 1997, p. 170), it also stands as a warning not to be deluded into believing in that naturalization. Indeed, it is precisely because, in our society, the street demonstration has become one of the most commonly used and routinized forms for collective expression of discontent that the prostitutes immediately viewed it as a possible recourse for *them*. But their inexperience prevented them from seeing that despite the apparent accessibility of this form of action, a street demonstration can only be successfully realized if a set of indispensable conditions have been met, one of which is accepting to display publicly the status in the name of which one is protesting. Because the street demonstration presupposes demonstrators’ exposure to the public eye, it seemed an overly risky, costly mode of action to the majority of prostitutes; concerned to remain anonymous, they preferred to defect. Entirely lacking the components that distinguish “true” demonstrations from informal rallies –a significant number of participants; signs and banners; slogan-chanting; a self-policing team– and publicly perceived as illegitimate and laughable, this aborted march shows by its very failure that any demonstration presupposes a minimal degree of practical mastery of the form. And the very inequality in the social distribution of such mastery or proficiency partakes of the political domination exercised over groups who have the least of it, such as prostitutes.

Increased repression

The scandal of August 1972 brought about the sudden, total collapse of the collusion that had existed between procurers and police, and with a new team in place, a return to the type of reasoning and logic particular to police functioning, which in turn put an end to the corruption. Freshly graduated from

(7) *Le Progrès*, Aug. 26, 1972.

police school, the new chief of the *mœurs* made it his primary objective to rebuild the façade of his considerably discredited institution. The suspicion could no longer be allowed to arise of any kind of complicity between the police and the *milieu*; the best visible sign that the correct distance was being observed was a firm attitude toward prostitutes and, to avoid all risk of new discredit, the destruction of any “tie-sign”, to use Goffman’s expression (1973, p. 186), between the police and the world of prostitution. Furthermore, to ensure that prostitution would no longer be the private hunting ground of the *mœurs* brigade, the whole of the Lyon police, “*habillé*” [uniformed] as well as “*civil*” [plainclothes] (to use the prostitutes’ own typology), regardless of whether they were attached to arrondissement stations or the various brigades of the “*Sûreté urbaine*” [urban security department], were given the right to keep an eye on, and above all crack down on, prostitution. Citations for “incitement to debauchery” became all the more frequent now that the hotel closures had forced the women to stand out in the streets longer and turn their tricks in alleys or clients’ cars. This of course made their activity more visible, scandalizing neighborhood residents. The intensified police repression was all the harder to bear because it was, in large part, arbitrary: some women were cited several times a day, sometimes even when not engaged in active soliciting or on days when they weren’t in the city. Long custody sessions, the culmination of night pursuits through the narrow Lyon streets, were often the occasion for police brutality, humiliation, and harassment. Knowing what was in store for her if she were picked up, the prostitute on the street had to remain permanently on her guard.

The prostitutes’ resentment against the police was all the more bitter given that, simultaneously, the various police services seemed to lose all interest in their safety. From March to August 1974, three of their number were murdered. The police found no trace of the perpetrators –because they didn’t look, claimed the victims’ indignant colleagues– and there was no let-up in the repression. Over the following months, other causes for indignation deepened discontent on the pavements. In early 1975 a number of women received tax notices where the sum due had been calculated on the basis of an extremely cursory estimation of their earnings; the notices sometimes included government claims for back taxes amounting to several tens of thousands of francs. Above all, a law condemning repeated “soliciting” offenders to prison terms was reactivated (article R 37 of the French penal code, punishing any person who has had to pay several fines for the same offense in the same city the same year). The prospect of prison deeply affected the prostitutes, since it raised the real threat of having their activity discovered by their parents or children and, worst of all, losing legal custody of the latter. “[Our] children don’t want to see their mothers go to jail” was their proclamation as they took over the church of Saint-Nizier on the morning of June 2. But though at the time this move struck the general public entirely by surprise, it had in fact been preceded by a patient labor of mobilization.

Accompanying the mobilization

One of the major advances that the resource mobilization approach has afforded to sociology of protest is to have shown that collective action processes are not a more or less mechanical result of sudden powerful eruptions of discontent; first and foremost they require the acquisition and mobilization of political resources. It is this that enables individuals to move from resigned acceptance of an unfortunate fate to protest action and demand-making (McCarthy and Zald, 1977, p. 1215). For a population characterized by a clear lack of such resources, this postulate requires us to consider the alliances that its members could potentially develop with actors both better organized than they and amenable to providing them with the means, skills, and activist know-how whose absence had impeded their mobilization until then. The Lyon prostitutes found such resource-providing allies primarily in the local section of the *catholique social* activist movement called the “*Nid*” [the word means nest], an abolitionist association closely linked to the *Jeunesse ouvrière chrétienne* [JOC; movement of young Christian workers] and long specialized in moral support and assistance to prostitutes. ⁽⁸⁾ *Nid* members accompanied the women through the different preparatory phases of the June 1975 movement.

As early as the wave of hotel closures in 1972, the *Nid* had taken up the prostitutes’ cause and begun relaying their grievances. Adopting the role of “conscience constituents” –a concept forged by McCarthy and Zald (1977, p. 1222) to designate those actors in a movement who “do not stand to benefit directly” from the success of a mobilization to which they contribute– *Nid* activists, together with social workers and non-violent self-management union activists, responded to the 1972 events by creating what they called a “*Groupe d’information sur la prostitution*” [Information group on prostitution], modeled on the “*Groupe d’information sur les prisons*” begun in the same period by Michel Foucault. The group’s main action was to publish and ensure the broad dissemination of a document entitled “Prostitution-vérité” [Prostitution-truth] denouncing the lack of any coherent French policy for promoting the social reintegration of women practicing prostitution and the precarious conditions that police repression forced on them. In the following months, *Nid* members became more and more active in defending the prostitutes, now overwhelmed with citations. One of their most important actions was to organize a series of negotiation meetings with the police in 1974, though these proved unproductive.

(8) The *Nid* is the main French proponent today of the philosophy of abolitionism, a Christianity-inspired movement that arose in England in the second half of the nineteenth century. The intent of its founding members was to combat any and all regulation of prostitution, including the compulsory health surveillance that prostitutes were subject to in many

European countries. For contemporary abolitionists, prostitution is a form of social maladjustment comparable to slavery; it must in no way be “managed” or officially recognized; instead, everything possible must be done to prevent men and women from prostituting themselves and to facilitate the social reintegration of persons exercising this activity.

It was on the basis of the *Nid*'s demonstrated commitment to the prostitutes that in the spring of 1975 a few of the women, firmly determined to defend themselves against the prison sentences threatening them, requested the association's assistance. New meetings organized by the abolitionist group enabled the prostitutes, assembled in an informal collective, to assess how many of their number might be mobilized – 68 showed up at the first meeting on April 23, a considerable figure given the poor turnout they were expecting, and one that confirmed the feasibility of a collective action – and envisage legal recourse against the threat of incarceration. The *Nid* offered the prostitutes the legal services of a defense lawyer named Boyer, who was also a Jesuit priest. Their acceptance was indicative of the network of alliances that was developing at that time between Catholic social activists and the world or "space" of prostitution. Hardly a defense lawyer for the *milieu*, Boyer belonged to the *Nid*'s own religious circle and was known as a specialist in defending marginal groups. The other significant aspect of this alliance configuration was that the meetings were held in the offices of the "*Chronique sociale*", a Catholic social activist association and publisher. On April 28 the prostitutes' collective addressed a request for an audience to the prefect of the Rhône. In his reply of May 6, this official took a combative tone: insinuating that *Nid* members were being manipulated by the prostitutes, he agreed to receive leaders from the former group but no delegates from the latter. The *Nid* deemed this proposal unacceptable.

Complementing the strategy of interpellating institutional actors was that of getting positive media coverage. The relations that certain abolitionists already had with journalists made it possible to get articles published in the local and national press denouncing the police crack-down.⁽⁹⁾ But it was television that offered the prostitutes their best opportunity for publicly expressing their grievances. On April 29, 1975, the prostitutes' leader, Ulla, accompanied by two leaders of the *Nid*, participated in a program called "*Les dossiers de l'écran*" whose subject that evening was prostitution. With her face concealed, Ulla presented her colleagues' recriminations. This first public appearance was quickly followed by press and radio interviews that consolidated Ulla's fame and her legitimacy as spokeswoman for the Lyon prostitutes. A press conference organized by the *Nid* on May 15 gave the women a further opportunity to present their grievances. On this occasion they denounced the imprecision of the "incitement to debauchery" offense, together with the "hypocrisy" of a legal system which, while allowing for a prostitute's prison sentence to be dropped if she managed to reintegrate into society, made that reintegration extremely difficult by forcing her to accumulate hefty debts in the form of fines and tax penalties.

After one last request to see the prefect was turned down, and as prison sentences were being handed down against approximately ten women, the prostitutes and their allies decided to radicalize the movement. The idea was

(9) The movement's main national press relay was *Libération* [leftist activist daily founded in 1973; first editor-in-chief was

Jean-Paul Sartre], whose local correspondent had been following the prostitutes' mounting discontent for several months.

to abandon local institutional negotiation channels in a spectacular action that might then be used to find new interlocutors at the national government level (in this case Françoise Giroud, Secretary of State for the “*Condition féminine*”), while drawing the police adversary onto uneasy ground where he would have more trouble acting –namely because he would be under scrutiny by “public opinion”– and would therefore have no choice but to negotiate. At a meeting on May 29 it was decided that the prostitutes would occupy a church.

Internal and external resources

An imported collective action repertoire

As one of the stigmatized and disorganized populations who, Goffman (1975, p. 36) underlines, have no “capacity for collective action” on their own, the prostitutes were primarily handicapped by their lack of protest tradition and experience. Specifically, they had no collective action repertoire (Tilly, 1978) from which to choose a protest mode that would enable them to put pressure on their adversaries while making their demands widely known. Such a repertoire, the fruit of actors’ accumulated experience and the sedimentation of past mobilizations (Dobry, 1990, pp. 362-363), was limited for them in June 1975 to a single experience –one not to be repeated at any cost. The August 1972 precedent had taught them at their own expense that what are routinized, institutionalized forms of protest action in most social worlds were not at all suited to their own (since, as mentioned, they went counter to their need to avoid publicity). Since then, however, they had not been able to acquire even minimal mastery over other possible forms of protest. This meant that the only way they could hope to choose the mode of action best suited to their cause was by appealing for outside help, making use of outside resources –in this case the activist experience and skills of their abolitionist allies, who did have such a repertoire and mastered its contents. For while the practice of occupying a building, especially a church, was completely unknown to the prostitutes, it had for several years been part of the protest tradition of social movements, particularly Catholic social activist ones and others inspired by the doctrine of non-violence. In the preceding years there had been several occupations of religious buildings by immigrants “*sans-papiers*” [without any legal permit to be in France] demanding official regularization of their situation; in some cases the immigrants had resorted to hunger strikes (Siméant, 1998). These actions had received wide support from fractions of the Christian left close to those who were now supporting the prostitutes: individual members or sympathizers of ideologically close political and union organizations, particularly the *PSU* and the *CFDT*,⁽¹⁰⁾ and persons with similar activist

(10) *PSU* (*Parti socialiste unifié*) small but significant far left, non-communist political party; supported the May '68 movement; *CFDT* (*Confédération française et démocratique du*

travail) union organization founded in 1964 when a majority of the *CFTC* (*Confédération française de travailleurs chrétiens*) broke off in favor of a union without religious affiliation.

dispositions, shaped in most cases by *Action catholique* ⁽¹¹⁾ and belonging to the self-made small bourgeoisie who, in the years of reconversion following the disappointment of their revolutionary aspirations in the aftermath of May '68, had made the defense of marginal populations their special area of struggle (Mauger, 1994).

The decision to occupy a church –once again, a specific form of action chosen from a range of possible forms– thus reflects the decisive influence exercised by the prostitutes' allies in the shaping of their action. The women had envisaged occupying the *Rhône Préfecture* –i.e., the power center of the police adversary– or City Hall; their allies demonstrated the dangers and dead-endedness of such actions. Testimonies diverge as to the paternity of the idea of occupying a church (Barbara, one of the prostitutes' leaders, attributes it to a *Nid* activist named Christian Delorme, while Delorme himself credits Claude Jaget, a journalist at *Libération*). It is significant that it was not attributed to the prostitutes themselves but rather one of their external supports, recognized as a depository of "activist competence".

Occupying a church presented the advantage of providing solid guarantees against possible eviction by the police, since they customarily could not intervene in a place of worship without being explicitly requested to do so by the clergy. ⁽¹²⁾ Traditionally considered a neutral space –indeed, a place of asylum for all the misfortunate and oppressed– the religious edifice offered the further advantage of "deterritorializing", to use Johanna Siméant's term (1998, p. 324), the conflict opposing prostitutes and police, thereby guaranteeing some impunity (if only relative and temporary) to women who could legally be imprisoned. Above all, church occupation enabled the women to avoid being seen, a risk which, as we know, many women were not prepared to take. By remaining inside the church, they could protest without being exposed to any external view. ⁽¹³⁾ Indeed, for those prostitutes whose families did not know what they did –and they seem to have been the majority– this feature of the mobilization was decisive in securing their participation. On a more symbolic level, occupying a religious building also provided the opportunity to impact on common representations of prostitution and prostitutes. Bringing together prostitution and church, entities that, in common representations, were mutually exclusive and irreconcilable, was one of the movement's strongest gestures; it was extremely helpful in focusing and keeping people's attention. Through the symbolic "*coup de force*" of a presentation of self that

(11) *Action catholique*: the entire range of apostolic lay movements in France, overseen by the French Catholic Church.

(12) While churches built before 1905, such as Saint-Nizier, are the property of the French state, and the police may legally, freely enter them, the tradition was that any intervention by the forces of law and order should first be approved by church authorities –a tradition which was, of course, not respected in

this instance since, as we know, the prostitutes were forcibly expelled by the police on June 10.

(13) One of the most delicate aspects of the prostitutes' contact with the media was how to maintain their visual anonymity. Throughout the occupation, they refused to allow photographers or television camera operators to take any frontal images, insisting above all that there be no images of their faces.

posited the non-contradiction between prostitution and religion, the prostitutes could hope to have an effect on the mental representation that “normals” –defined by Goffman (1975) as persons not belonging to a stigmatized group– usually had of their activity and “morality”, and thereby to help legitimate their cause.

The *Nid* activists’ assistance did not just involve furnishing a model of action that had already been developed on other stages and that the prostitutes would merely have to copy. It was the activists who made the church occupation possible by handling the necessary negotiations to that end with the city’s religious authorities. As an organization with a marked Catholic identity –it had been founded by a cleric, and the Lyon section included a priest and a seminarian– the *Nid* had both full religious legitimacy and fairly easy access to the local Catholic hierarchy; both were helpful in getting that hierarchy to accept the idea of a church occupation. In fact, the outcome of the negotiations was closely tied to the positions of the various actors and their relative power within the city’s religious “field”. While it was not hard to convince the parish priest of Saint-Nizier, who actually knew some of the prostitutes, since a number of them were devout Catholics and frequently came to his church, it was less certain that approval could be gotten from the archbishopric. The archbishop at the time, Cardinal Renard, was known as a conservative. He had only recently arrived in Lyon, sent by Rome with the mission of bringing the local clergy back under control after their relative turbulence during May ’68. His arrival had been perceived by the church personnel of Lyon as an attempt by the Vatican to impose thorough and binding supervision, and their response had been to boycott him, in response to which he gave up all attempts to exercise his official authority, devoting himself exclusively to prayer. Into this void of religious power stepped the auxiliary bishop, who, as the *Nid*’s former chaplain, had been made sensitive to the prostitutes’ cause. It was he who exercised the functions deserted by the titular official, whom, it would seem, was now presented with a “*fait accompli*” and made to consent to the occupation against his will.

Mobilization within the space of prostitution

Sociologists of protest have long concurred with Anthony Oberschall’s idea that mobilization processes cannot be envisaged independently of the properties and characteristics of the social worlds in which they occur and develop, namely the degree of internal cohesion. But even more than this, our analyses must take into account the kinds of logic specific to those worlds, namely the different motivations or interests guiding actors who are a part of them, and the power of such motivations and interests to make the actors adopt specific rules of conduct, forms of social relations, perception schemata, criteria for anticipating future developments and instruments of cognitive assessment that then shape and limit their representations and tactical activities. Michel Dobry (1986, p. 101) named this phenomenon the

“*captation des calculs*”.⁽¹⁴⁾ Concerning the internal structure of the prostitution world and the kinds of logic specific to it, a number of elements may be identified that worked both to facilitate and inhibit collective action.

One of the most important constraints in the set imposed on the prostitutes’ mobilization by the internal logic of their social world was the fact that many of them were subjected to procurers. For the procurers, occupying the church represented the major risk of having their illicit activities exposed, since it presupposed the focusing of public attention on their world, habitually governed by the imperative of discretion vis-à-vis all other components of the social world –an imperative nicely summed up in the expression “law of silence”. According to the movement’s key figure, it was necessary for the prostitutes to persuade their various procurers that the police repression was a threat to their own economic interests; in this way they could get the men to grant them the relative autonomy their mobilization required:

The young women would never have been able to follow if their pimps hadn’t given the signal [...] I talked about it first –because really, I never could’ve done it if I hadn’t– to my husband but who was also at that time my procurer [...] So on one hand we absolutely had to get his permission, and then he had to do the same thing vis-à-vis the other procurers he knew so they would allow the young women to do the thing [...] So he did the thing on his side –that is, got those lousy bastards to understand [...] that hey, it was their lunch that was on the line, their own future would be going down in profitability, so they would agree. They agreed first of all among themselves.⁽¹⁵⁾

Though it represented the first obstacle to mobilization, the fact that the prostitution market consisted in several hierarchically organized networks became an advantage as soon as the prostitutes got their procurers’ approval. It was because certain women already exercised a form of delegated authority over the prostitutes who belonged to the same procuring network that they were immediately recognized as leaders and were able to impose their decisions on their fellows. Since certain positions in the prostitution world –positions that were already effective because already known and recognized– conferred legitimacy and authority on those who occupied them, those positions constituted a source of support for mobilization of the prostitute population. The *Nid* activists, direct observers of the prostitutes’ interactions, later described the group as consisting of a small number of potentially authoritarian leaders and a majority of passive “followers”: “Not all the women had the same status: some didn’t have the right to leave the church while others went out whenever they wanted [...] The prostitution was organized internally, and though we didn’t really grasp how, that organization was reflected in the way things happened. So there were women who led and women who obeyed –we shouldn’t idealize the thing either [...] There was Z, who was definitely one of those women who had a role in organizing the prostitution, and there were

(14) The author defines this term as “the fact that members of a given sector cannot do otherwise in their relevant activities –and regardless of what they wish or believe– than to

calculate according to the social logic specific to that sector. They are in a way caught in, or captive to, that logic” (Dobry, 1986, p. 103).

(15) Interview with Ulla.

the women under her authority. When Z said something they were all obedience". (16)

As a secret world bordering on the criminal one, a world in which violence was one of the primary instruments for regulating social relations, the prostitution "space" also had mobilization techniques at its disposal that could be particularly effective against women tempted to defect. Twenty years after the events, some of the protagonists relate that they hadn't initially wished to participate and only joined the movement under threat: "They sent women with dogs [...] It was 'Either you get into the church or we'll set the dogs on you'. So what could we do, we didn't have a choice. I went in, I had to."

Threats and physical constraint thus played the role of selective negative incentive, to use Olson's terminology (1978), with women who might have been tempted by the solution of "free riding", as is clear from the following comments by two other participants: "At the time everyone really had to go along because [...] well, there was a certain police [...] that kind of forced them to go along [...] Why were some people going to stick out their necks and then the others wouldn't participate?"; "There were some who took advantage of the fact that we were all over there –obviously there must have been plenty of work [...] So there were some who stuffed their pockets all that time, who didn't give a damn about the movement, who were glad enough to take the advantages but not the inconveniences." These comments justify the hypothesis that the church occupation also seemed a relevant mode of action to the prostitutes' leaders because it enabled them to keep reluctant colleagues in a closed space from which each exit was carefully guarded and checked, and thus to thwart any attempt at defection.

Clearly, then, the prostitution "space" in Lyon in June 1975 did not consist in a disorganized, atomized, or "anomic" population –though this is what it later became– but was instead a group characterized, in addition to its hierarchical organization, by a relatively high degree of internal cohesion and specific sociability spaces and practices. Another reason the prostitutes were able to mobilize was that a kind of minimal solidarity and sense of group identity existed among them at that time, based first and foremost on common representations and similar experiences of police repression and the fact that they already had their own meeting spaces (a number of red-light district bars) and effective communication networks. In this connection we should take into account the fact that prostitution in Lyon at the time was relatively centralized, concentrated mainly in the narrow streets of the urban district at the confluent of the Rhône and Saône Rivers. And though such concentration might exacerbate feelings of competition and jealousy, it also, to a certain degree, facili-

(16) The legitimacy of the movement's leaders was not due exclusively to the fact that their procurers had delegated authority to them. It was not by chance that the two main leaders of the Lyon movement, Ulla and Barbara, were women with higher education levels than their fellows (Ulla had a basic legal qualification and

Barbara had passed the difficult high school-leaving *baccalauréat* exam) and catered to a "masochist" clientele. Prostitutes known to engage in this type of practice have a reputation for authority and toughness that generally puts their colleagues in awe of them; on this question see Mathieu (1998, pp. 516-522).

tated the development of interrelations. Most accounts of the events underscore that the relations of solidarity obtaining between the prostitutes were stronger than the antagonisms between procuring networks or the logic of commercial competition. Such solidarity was expressed primarily through giving assistance in case of attack, disseminating information on potential threats of attack, and giving the alert against the police.

In this connection the policy of collective swoop arrests adopted by the police after the scandal of 1972 involuntarily worked to strengthen relations and the sense of solidarity among prostitutes. Regularly apprehended and kept in custody several hours on the premises of the *Sûreté urbaine*, they had been able to meet each other and develop ties which, when it came to shaping and realizing their collective action, helped strengthen mutual relations of trust and solidarity, thus confirming what certain American studies have shown (Snow *et al.*, 1980); namely, the decisive importance in recruiting participants for a social movement of pre-established face-to-face interrelations. The long hours in the “*violon*” [“clink”] had been spent talking, exchanging experiences and information, playing cards, and the like –all practices whose effect was to strengthen cohesion among the prostitutes of the Lyon region, as is clearly expressed in the following remarks by one of them:

When they found us on the street they would take us to the police station –it was Bellecour at the time. And we spent [...] how many hours there? maybe three hours [...] When I was starting out we all knew each other pretty well since we all got rounded up, so we were all together there. So we played belote; all that time there we played belote, rummy [...] so you see, we got to know each other much better than now. Now we don't.

The prostitutes' movement did not, therefore, emerge *ex nihilo* but was built on an effective pre-existing structure of social relations. From this perspective the mobilization of Lyon's prostitution space can be compared on some points to Oberschall's “community model” (1973, p. 119 and pp. 129-132), where the internal organization of a collective and the presence of recognized leaders, networks, and “traditional” forms of social relations facilitate the emergence and development of a collective action. Identifying “internal resources” specific to the prostitution world thus prevents us from making the mistake, noted by McAdam in his criticism of certain partisans of resource mobilization analysis, of underestimating the at least latent or potential capacities mobilizable by those populations that seem to have the least aptitude for collective action. Above all, seeing that such resources exist should lead us to reject objectivist representations of what political resources are and how they have impact. This means that contrary to fixed, substantialist conceptions such as Tilly's (1978, p. 69) which attribute an intrinsic “value” to such representations, we should take into account their fundamentally relational character and look closely at the different modes of making effective use of such resources (Dobry, 1986, p. 24), resources that are in fact only effective because they are perceived, evaluated and used in particular contexts and within clearly delimited social worlds. Far from being stable “things in themselves” independent of the situations within which they have impact, such resources must be understood as closely tied to the social worlds to which the actors who make use of them belong. At this point we are led to

take into account their extreme variability and instability, exposed as they are to sudden fluctuations, depending on the contexts or social stages on which they are actualized. ⁽¹⁷⁾ It is not “in itself” that the hierarchical organization of the prostitution market, for example, constitutes a resource for collective action; it can only play that role within precise contexts, when it appears to certain actors as a basis on which to assemble the group to be mobilized and get that group to act. Effective within the strict limits of the prostitution world, this very resource could well prove harmful to the mobilization by discrediting it should its existence become known in the “public space”.

Different sources of support

Though the “internal resources” just discussed –hierarchical organization of the prostitution world and interrelations among prostitutes– proved useful supports for collective action, they could not in themselves suffice to make the mobilization possible. The demonstration of June 1972, decided and organized by the prostitutes alone, had been a total fiasco; the occupation of Saint-Nizier three years later could only be concretized with the decisive help of the *Nid* members’ activist know-how. Examining the alliance processes between the protesting group and its external sources of assistance provides an opportunity to evoke an aspect of collective action that is often neglected in analyses of it: the frequent heterogeneity of the motivations and objectives that lead the different individuals and groups of individuals to coordinate their actions within a single social movement. Moreover, through comparative study of the various logics that respectively led *Nid* members and militant feminists –the prostitutes’ other main source of support– to involve themselves in the prostitutes’ cause, we shall be able to account for one of the most important dynamics of the movement: competition between these two sources in defining the meaning and stakes of the mobilization.

“Raising consciousness”

The *Nid* movement, whose declared objective is to work for “a world without prostitution”, is, as mentioned, an organization with direct ties to the *catholicisme social* movement. Its founder, Father Talvas, had been chaplain of the *Mouvement populaire des familles (MPF)*, and the *Nid*, officially founded in 1946, developed thanks to resource assistance from the *Jeunesse ouvrière chrétienne*. The *Nid* was an integral part of *catholicisme social*’s project of ensuring a “Christian presence in the world”, especially for the most underprivileged populations, through a strategy of adapting the religious message to the specificities of each social milieu. In this strategy, laypersons played a preponderant role.

(17) For a similar analysis, see Kurzman (1994).

To understand the commitment to the prostitutes demonstrated by the Lyon section of the *Nid*, which in 1975 had no fewer than 50 members, we must take into account certain characteristics of those members, particularly their relative youth. Though Lyon *Nid* activists, like their older fellow-members (mainly active in the national leadership), had for the most part been active in the nationwide Catholic scout program and the *JOC*, and though they tended to have the same social origins and attitudes as the older members, this homology must not cause us to forget that two sociologically similar sets of members recruited at two different moments in social time are not equivalent. Because of their youth, the Lyon activists (particularly one of the most dynamic among them, Christian Delorme) were prepared to import into the *Nid* a whole new set of themes and frames of reference that broke with those developed by the leadership that had been in place since the organization's founding. Influenced in particular by Marxism and psychoanalysis, these members had a critical view of the approach to assistance that had been promulgated by the founders, which they found paternalistic and *misérabiliste* [focused on the sordid side of experience]. Within the *Nid*, they accelerated the process of laicization and opening up to the world at large common to many Christian organizations at that time (Grignon, 1977), to the point of winning the interest and sympathy of a non-Catholic following, including –and I shall come back to this– some of the prostitutes themselves. ⁽¹⁸⁾

The main new reference imported by the young activists was the approach known as “*conscientisation*” [consciousness raising], first developed as a pedagogical method for illiterate populations of the third world, inspired by “liberation theology”, and theorized by the Brazilian pedagogue Paulo Freire (1974). The culmination of a synthesis of Sartrean existentialism, progressive Christian humanism, and revolutionary Marxism, this approach was widely disseminated in the 1970s in movements which, often directly linked, like the *Nid*, to *Action catholique*, intervened in favor of marginalized groups. The consciousness-raising approach advocates establishing relations with the groups it addresses that are less paternalistic than those of more traditional approaches: people are not to be guided according to a preestablished, external model of “liberation”, but rather provided with the means of “personally becoming conscious” of the situation of “alienation” they are in and “defining for themselves the means of liberating themselves from their oppression”. More specifically, the *Nid* activists saw their role as one of actively supporting the prostitutes so as to facilitate their “self-organizing”, with the hope that this would open the way to their “liberation”:

It was about how people who are oppressed take themselves in hand in order to become the authors of their own liberation. They shouldn't wait for liberation from others who would bend over them and say, in a highly paternalistic way, “We have brought you your

(18) A number of *Nid* members underscored this point in my interviews with them: “There were a few non-Christians in the *Nid* movement, though our orthodoxy was still ‘We honor Jesus Christ’”, said one; “Since we’re

not Christians, for us to be in the *Nid* already meant that we found a certain resonance there –of people, of a conception.... It really wasn’t a problem.” [that they were Christian and we weren’t], explained another.

liberation on a platter". Instead, "You yourselves are the artisans of your liberation" [...] So in Lyon we said to ourselves: "This is perhaps an audacious attitude, not without risk, but it's the one we must take with prostituted persons. It's not up to us to do everything for them; they themselves must be the artisans of their action".⁽¹⁹⁾

Rather than an enlightened "*avant-garde*", the *Nid* activists thought of themselves as playing a back-up or service role, and intended by that approach to leave the prostitutes free to control their action while preventing them from committing the blunders that their inexperience predisposed them to. In practice this was particularly difficult because of the different levels of competence in collective action matters distinguishing novice prostitutes from seasoned activists.⁽²⁰⁾ In supporting the prostitutes' immediate demands and trying to efface themselves so the prostitutes might have the largest possible autonomy, the abolitionist activists agreed to suspend (or more exactly, to render temporarily implicit) their aim of making prostitution disappear, in the hope that their mobilization would enable the women to "become conscious" of the "alienation" that their activity represented, and that this in turn would move them to quit the streets of their own accord. By affecting to adopt a non-directive attitude, one respectful of the prostitutes' autonomy, while toning down the most dissuasive aspects of their own organization's identity (since a majority of the prostitutes in fact did not wish to cease their activity), the Lyon activists were able to make themselves acceptable as allies to women *a priori* reluctant to become involved with an association that had a reputation for moralizing and being sanctimonious, for whom the preestablished imperative was an end to all prostitution, and with whom they had had only distant relations before: "The people in the *Nid* [...] understood that in any case they weren't going to get anywhere by saying, 'Stop, don't do that any more'; moralizing wasn't going to get them anywhere. So I think that was why everyone –most [of the prostitutes]– decided to spend a bit of time with them over there."⁽²¹⁾

The prostitutes' overt will to preserve their autonomy should not, however, prevent us from seeing the work done by the abolitionists to shape their demands.⁽²²⁾ The minutes of one meeting clearly show that one of the leader's original demands was for recognized occupational status for prostitutes and that she gave up that demand under the abolitionists' influence: "Through what might look like contradictions, Ulla made definite progress in her thinking, as C. [a *Nid* member] clearly pointed out the 'banana peel' dangers of charging into the fray with a demand for [occupational] status [...] recognized, accepted, etc. [...] Careful! Those would have been the first steps in normalizing things, which in the short term might have satisfied them in the immedi-

(19) Interview with a *Nid* activist.

(20) This is clear from minutes of meetings for planning the occupation: "But how could we not do it for them? We said over and over, 'You've got to group together, get organized!' 'Yes, but how?'" (Account of *Nid* activities, Lyon, April, 1975).

(21) Interview with Ulla.

(22) Throughout the movement, the different leaflets and open letters signed by the "Lyon Prostitutes' Collective" were in fact written by Christian Delorme on the basis of discussions with the prostitutes.

ate present but in the long term threatened to turn against the girls' own interests." (23)

The relations between the prostitutes and *Nid* activists thus seem to have become those of "collusion" (Dobry, 1986, pp. 110-113). Each of the partner groups showed itself capable of respecting the implicit principle of mutual non-interference: the abolitionists accepted never to raise the question of procurers and didn't show the least curiosity in this matter, tacitly agreeing to "close their eyes" to the logic and stakes internal to the prostitution world, while the prostitutes, working side by side with the *Nid* activists, abandoned all demands for official recognition of their activity as an "occupation in its own right", thus enabling the *Nid* activists to support them without seeming to work toward goals that went directly counter to their organization's official positions. Thanks to this mutual precluding of potential sources of conflict, it seemed to each of the two partner groups that the alliance did not imperil their respective internal logics, and this in turn strengthened the perception on both sides that a common action was feasible.

Ill-adapted feminist support

As an organization, the *Nid* was specifically and exclusively concerned with prostitution. While its support of Ulla and her companions' impulse to protest didn't go without saying, (24) it was greatly facilitated by its members' long-term familiarity with the prostitution world. This was not the case for the *gauchiste* and feminist organizations and activists who began supporting the prostitutes after their occupation of the church became known. Their support was not immediate, as the utter novelty of the movement caused strong uncertainty about its legitimacy as well as how sound it was, tactically, to support it. Given the stigmata ordinarily attaching to the world of prostitution and the other activists' unfamiliarity with this social world, they found themselves with the problem of not really knowing what the movement was about. The routine cognitive touchstones that usually enabled them to "frame" (Goffman's term; 1991) social movements as soon as they appeared and made it possible for rival organizations within a single political movement to evaluate each other were of no use here; this in turn meant that overt support represented a political risk that was difficult to assess. The prostitutes clearly perceived this hesitation: "All the left and extreme-left press were elbowing each other to come see us. The political parties wanted to understand our motives. Why had we taken on such a struggle? It really worried them. They

(23) Account of *Nid* activities, Lyon, April 1975.

(24) In fact, the national leadership expressed serious reservations about the Lyon activists' support of the movement: "There was a strong conflict between the national staff—including the founding father, Father Talvas,

and his permanent groupies— and Lyon, who were saying, 'We have to help these people self-organize.' The Paris staff said, 'No, not at all, self-organization means recognizing the existence and legitimacy of the occupation of prostitute.'" (interview with Christian Delorme).

didn't want to get mixed up in a bad business by supporting us." (Barbara and Coninck, 1977, p. 74). Rumors that the movement was being "manipulated" by certain procurers took on great importance in evaluating how appropriate it was to support the prostitutes.

The members of the Lyon feminist movement could nonetheless not remain indifferent long to the church-occupiers' cause. ⁽²⁵⁾ A form of structural constraint, tied to the definition this movement had given of itself, required the feminists to support the prostitutes' action. Their conversion to the cause of all dominated persons and groups dictated, particularly in a case where the domination endured was directly related to female sexuality and identity, that they support Ulla and her companions (especially since the prostitutes had already made use of the "1975 – International Women's Year" theme and the first national official they had addressed their complaints to was the secretary of state for the "*Condition féminine*"). Still, the feminists' discourse often seemed out of tune and out of touch with the prostitutes' demands.

The ten or so Lyon feminists who mobilized for the prostitutes' cause demonstrated their support in concrete terms by collecting funds, putting up signs and banners outside the church, and passing out leaflets. They justified their solidarity in the following terms: "An analysis of the similarities between the oppressed situation of prostituted women, on the one hand, and that of 'wives, mothers, and women workers', on the other. 'This one with her boss to keep her job, that one with her husband to keep her material security –it's not just on the street that women are led to prostitute themselves'." ⁽²⁶⁾ Through this parallel between marriage and prostitution, the prostitutes' condition was presented as a paradigmatic form of oppression to which "patriarchal society" subjected all women: "We, like they, are in the situation of prostitutes in that, forced to marry, we are obliged to sell ourselves body and soul to our lord and master in order to survive and have a respectable place in this male society". ⁽²⁷⁾ By presenting the movement as "the symbol of the liberation of all women", ⁽²⁸⁾ the feminists tried to universalize, or expand, the cause they had seized on, and thereby to legitimate it. As Luc Boltanski has shown (1990), in order to be recognized as valid and be followed, the cause of a group as clearly marked by indignity and social "pettiness" as prostitutes has to be de-singularized and broadened by relating it to a higher level of generality –here "all women".

Still, the feminists soon found themselves confronted with the fundamental ambiguity of their support. They were, of course, ready to defend the prostitutes against police repression, but they rejected any defense of prostitution as such. It quickly became clear that the prostitutes' protest was aimed above all at facilitating the exercise of what they considered their craft (by ensuring greater safety, putting an end to police bookings, and getting prison sentences

(25) On the women's movement in Lyon in the 1970s see CLEF (1989).

(26) CLEF (1989, p. 65). Quotations within

the quotation are from feminist leaflets.

(27) *Ibid.*; leaflet.

(28) *Ibid.*; leaflet.

lifted), rather than expressing any desire to get off the street or any unfavorable judgment of their activity or men in general. This contradiction is clearly expressed in the following account by one of the feminists: "What the women of Saint-Nizier wanted was not what we wanted. We didn't really know if we should support the prostitutes' struggle *bam!* like that, or whether we should express our own positions on prostitution, accepting that the two were contradictory. In sum, *they* wanted to be able to practice their occupation in good conditions, and *we*, even though we didn't actually say it, wanted that occupation to disappear." (CLEF, 1989, p. 66). In their competition with the *Nid* activists over defining the meaning and issues of the movement (the *Nid* in fact accused the feminists of trying to "*récupérer*" [take over] the prostitutes' cause for themselves),⁽²⁹⁾ the Lyon feminists were at a disadvantage in that, less familiar with the prostitution world and therefore less apt at reaching compromises with the protesters over their demands, they had greater difficulty shaping their discourse so as to make it acceptable to the prostitutes, appearing to most of them as less solid or "plausible" allies than the abolitionists.

The feminists' support of the prostitutes ultimately seems to have been their response to a kind of unexpected opportunity to act which it was impossible for them not to seize. Because the prostitutes' protest "spoke" to certain feminist preoccupations, these activists were moved to join a mobilization begun by others and to try to give it their own definition. This is clearly expressed by one feminist activist, according to whom the support given to the prostitutes was essentially non-premeditated and due to the immediate context: "We got involved in the debate on prostitution because the prostitutes' movement was happening. It wasn't, at the time, [...] one of our major preoccupations [...] So in fact we jumped on a moving train, as they say." To understand why the feminists rallied to the cause, it is no doubt necessary to take into account the situation of their own movement in June 1975. The struggle to legalize abortion, which had taken up the greater part of French feminist effort over the preceding years, had been won: in February 1975 the parliament had adopted Simone Veil's bill on "voluntary pregnancy interruption". The women's movement was therefore still in a state of mobilization and full of activist potential, but it was, in a way, without a cause; it was under these circumstances that it turned its attention to the prostitutes. Moreover, the feminists' support would prove ephemeral: summer vacation was near at hand (the majority of the feminists worked in the French educational system), and when it came it had the effect, at least in Lyon, of demobilizing this fraction of the movement's support.

(29) We have here a feature that Boltanski seems to have neglected in his theory on denunciation of injustice. While the credibility of such denunciation may well increase proportionally with the distance between victim and denouncer (Boltanski, 1990, p. 284), too great a distance or difference between these two "actants" nonetheless runs the risk of making

the disinterestedness of the second group look suspect since it is trying to take charge of a cause that is too foreign to it, and this in turn may make it possible –as often happens between rival activist worlds– to discredit that group for "recuperating" the cause –that is, reducing or enslaving the generality of the cause to its own highly specific interests.

The fact that the prostitutes' mobilization gave rise to competition between different "sources of support" was not its most remarkable feature. We notice, moreover, that in spite of the significant differences in frames of reference and types of discourse, feminists and abolitionists had highly similar visions of prostitution, both groups perceiving the prostitutes' "own good" to lie in their ceasing an activity viewed as intrinsically negative. The originality of the movement lay, instead, in the fact that the protest group and its allies were guided by diametrically opposed objectives. Whereas Ulla and her colleagues were demanding to be able to continue to prostitute themselves without police repression or exposure of their activity to those closest to them, what their different sources of support sought above all –more or less implicitly– was to provide them with the means to quit the street. This divergence, while taking radical form here (and thus easier to spot) is probably, to varying degrees, a feature of most movements that bring together actors belonging to different social worlds in support what of they all represent (more or less clearly or justifiably) as the "same" cause. More generally, it shows the extreme naïveté of analyses that seek to attribute a single meaning to a given mobilization. Quite the contrary, it invites the sociologist of collective action to envisage such actions as the culmination of a process that has created a relation of interdependence between actors guided by highly heterogeneous practical logics and senses of what is at stake and what is to be worked for. The definition of the aims or ends that a social movement means to accomplish, like the definition of its "meaning", is never an unequivocal given, stable and shared by all involved; quite the contrary, it is one of the major issues and stakes of such a movement, and, through the struggles it provokes between rival protagonists, one of the principle "engines" of the movement's internal dynamics. This means that there is a strong chance that a social movement's objectives will be redefined, modified, contested, and reevaluated in the course of the action itself. Those objectives cannot, therefore, be considered transparent or taken for granted; nor can they be seen as the fruit of the analysis which the sociologist, assuming an "overview" position, *a posteriori* and from the outside, makes of that movement.

Taking into account the real heterogeneity or "dispersion" (Dobry, 1986, p. 31) constitutive of collective action phenomena offers the advantage, to my mind, of leading the sociologist not to take their *collective* aspect for a preexisting given but instead to place that aspect at the very center of the analysis by trying to identify the modes by which an action is constituted, consolidated, and, possibly, falls apart. There is no doubt that such a research approach, in its attempt to truly integrate the diversity of the various projects, perception schemata and tactical aims that lead disparate individuals or groups to try to coordinate their actions within the same mobilized collective, may in the future shed new light on processes of alliance and coalition –those very processes that, in texts on collective action, are still too often envisaged exclusively in terms of their favorable (Jenkins and Perrow, 1977; Cress and Snow, 1996) or damaging (Marx and Useem, 1971; McAdam, 1982; Jenkins and Eckert, 1986; Taylor, 1998) effects on mobilizations.

*
**

As mentioned, the Lyon prostitutes were evicted from Saint-Nizier church a week after occupying it. The requests for mediation successively addressed to the Secretary of State for the “*Condition féminine*” Françoise Giroud and the Minister of Health Simone Veil had led nowhere, but a precedent-setting judgment did cancel the prostitutes’ prison sentences shortly after their expulsion. Above all, through the unexpected mobilization of prostitutes in several other cities, ⁽³⁰⁾ and repercussions in the media, their movement had taken on dimensions that could hardly have been predicted, and new demands appeared; specifically, for a redefining of the offense of procurement through cohabitation and access for prostitutes to the *Sécurité sociale* [French national health care system]. During the summer and fall of 1975 the struggle continued. Major meetings were held (the “prostitutes’ *États généraux*” assembly at the Lyon trade council in late June; a national conference on prostitution, with prostitutes participating, at the *Salle de la Mutualité*, a renowned Paris meeting hall, in November), and a series of local actions engaged in, though by a dwindling number of participants. Meanwhile, the government commissioned a report on the issue from a magistrate named Guy Pinot. Pinot’s “*Mission d’information sur la prostitution*”, presented in December 1975, proposed a number of measures for regulating prostitution that came close to meeting the prostitutes’ demands. The report was never examined in the ministerial committee and was ultimately interpreted by all the protagonists as a maneuver to “bury” the problems raised by the mobilization. Weakened both by the disengagement of some of its resource-providing sources of support, such as the leftist and feminist groups, who quickly turned to “causes” closer to their traditional preoccupations, and the prostitutes’ own inability to organize in a way that would give them both autonomy and stability, the movement had died out by spring 1976.

Just as “successful” mobilizations are more attractive to analysts than those that fail or come to an end before reaching their objectives, so a movement’s emergence and development phases generally elicit more commentary than the conditions of its decline or failure. ⁽³¹⁾ But decline and failure are no less worthy of the attention of sociologists of collective action, and to conclude I would like to look at some possible lessons that may be drawn from the fact that the prostitutes’ movement did not last. Once again, it is to my mind by attending to the specificities of the social worlds within which processes of collective action develop –or don’t– that we will be able to identify some of the determining factors of the prostitutes’ inability to prolong their movement. One of the most decisive of these is no doubt the quick disengagement of the movement’s main leaders, who abandoned the movement a few months after

(30) The prostitutes of Paris took up the cause on June 7, and their involvement constituted a turning point for the movement. Receiving only weak support from a local team of *Nid* activists, who didn’t share the Lyon abolitionists’ “consciousness-raising” approach, the Paris prostitutes turned toward the support being offered by feminists, specifically activists

in the *Mouvement français pour le planning familial*. As it took on national proportions, therefore, the movement also brought about an alliance reconfiguration in which abolitionist influence was weakened and feminist influence strengthened.

(31) For a recent exception see Voss (1996)

the various occupations had come to an end and tried to use their recent fame to get out of the prostitution world. It was as if, having internalized a sense of the indignity of their activity, these women wished to rid themselves as fast as possible of a feature of their identity that they could no longer prevent themselves from perceiving as ignominious despite their own proclamations to the contrary during the movement. Given the weight of the stigmata attaching to their activity, the individual solution of “exit” (a common if generally unrealized plan among persons practicing prostitution), as soon as it was felt to be a real possibility, was perceived as more attractive than “voice” –though, paradoxically, in this case, “voice” helped provide the means to “exit” (Hirschman, 1995). Since what the movement’s leaders’ attitude showed was that they themselves were not fully convinced of the validity of pursuing the action or the dignity of the marginal social world they were declaring themselves representatives of, the movement could only culminate in its own demobilization –and a new phase of fatalistic resignation.

The propensity to defect of even those actors the most disposed to speak up has already been detected in other fields by Hirschman (1995, p. 80, p. 170) and confirms the depth of the ambivalence that, as Goffman has pointed out (1975, p. 129), characterizes the relation of stigmatized individuals to their condition. This ambivalence also reveals what is, to my mind, one of the major difficulties facing any dominated and politically inexperienced group engaged in protest action, that of maintaining their belief in the relevance of their recourse to collective action and the validity of what they seek to gain from it. It is to be hoped that such considerations will move sociologists of protest movements, following François Chazel’s suggestion (1993, p. 159), to perceive mobilization phenomena not only in terms of resource mobilization but also in terms of the mobilization and consolidation of loyalties.

Lilian MATHIEU

*Laboratoire d'Analyse des Systèmes Politiques – Université Paris X-Nanterre
200, avenue de la République – 92001 Nanterre cedex France*

Translation: Amy Jacobs

Previously published: RFS, 1999, 40, 3

REFERENCES

- Barbara, Coninck C. de, 1977. – *La partagée*, Paris, Éditions de Minuit.
- Boltanski L., 1990. – “La dénonciation publique”, in *L’amour et la justice comme compétences*, Paris, Métailié, pp. 253-366.
- Chazel F., 1992. – “Mouvements sociaux”, in R. Boudon (dir.), *Traité de sociologie*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, pp. 263-312.
- 1993. – “La place du politique dans les mobilisations contestataires”, in F. Chazel (dir.), *Action collective et mouvements sociaux*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, pp. 145-159.

- CLEF (Centre lyonnais d'études féministes), 1989. – *Chronique d'une passion : le mouvement de libération des femmes à Lyon*, Paris, L'Harmattan.
- Cress D. M., Snow D. A., 1996. – "Mobilization at the Margins: Resources, Benefactors, and the Viability of Homeless Social Movement Organizations", *American Sociological Review*, 61, pp. 1089-1109.
- Dobry M., 1986. – *Sociologie des crises politiques*, Paris, Presses de la Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques.
- 1990. – "Calcul, concurrence et gestion du sens", in P. Favre (dir.), *La manifestation*, Paris, Presses de la Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques, pp. 357-386.
- Duyvendak J. W., 1994. – *Le poids du politique. Nouveaux mouvements sociaux en France*, Paris, L'Harmattan.
- Fillieule O., 1997. – *Stratégies de la rue*, Paris, Presses de Sciences Po.
- Fillieule O., Péchu C., 1993. – *Lutter ensemble. Les théories de l'action collective*, Paris, L'Harmattan.
- Freire P., 1974. – *Pédagogie des opprimés*, Paris, Maspero [*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, New York, Continuum, 1970].
- Gamson W., 1990. – *The Strategy of Social Protest*, Belmont (Ca), Wadsworth.
- Goffman E., 1973. – *La mise en scène de la vie quotidienne. Tome 2 : Les relations en public*, Paris, Éditions de Minuit [*Relations in Public: Microstudies of the Public Order*, New York, Basic Books (1st 1965)].
- 1975. – *Stigmate*, Paris, Éditions de Minuit [*Stigma*, Englewood Cliffs (Nj), Prentice-Hall, 1963].
- 1991. – *Les cadres de l'expérience*, Paris, Éditions de Minuit [*Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*, Cambridge (Mas), Harvard University Press, 1974].
- Grignon C., 1977. – "Sur les relations entre les transformations du champ religieux et les transformations de l'espace politique", *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales*, 16, pp. 3-34.
- Hirschman, A. O. 1995. – *Défection et prise de parole*, Paris, Fayard [*Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States*, Cambridge (Mas), Harvard University Press, 1974].
- Jenkins J. C., Perrow C., 1977. – "Insurgency of the Powerless: Farm Worker Movements (1946-1972)", *American Sociological Review*, 42, pp. 249-268.
- Jenkins J. C., Eckert C. M., 1986. – "Channeling Black Insurgency: Elite Patronage and Professional Social Movement Organizations in the Development of the Black Movement", *American Sociological Review*, 51, pp. 812-829.
- Kurzman C., 1994. – "A Dynamic View of Resources: Evidence from the Iranian Revolution", *Research in Social Movements, Conflicts and Change*, 17, pp. 53-84.
- Marx G. T., Useem M., 1971. – "Majority Involvement in Minority Movements: Civil Rights, Abolition, Untouchability", *Journal of Social Issues*, 27, 1, pp. 81-104.
- Mathieu L., 1998. – *L'action collective des prostituées. Le cheminement incertain de la constitution d'un groupe*, Thèse de doctorat en science politique, Nanterre, Université Paris X-Nanterre.
- McAdam D., 1982. – *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency 1930-1970*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press.
- McCarthy J. D., Zald M. N., 1977. – "Resource Mobilization and Social Movements: A Partial Theory", *American Journal of Sociology*, 82, 6, pp. 1212-1241.
- Mann P., 1991. – *L'action collective. Mobilisation et organisation des minorités actives*, Paris, Armand Colin.
- Mauger G., 1994. – "Gauchisme, contre-culture et néo-libéralisme: pour une histoire de la 'génération 68'", in CURAPP, *L'identité politique*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, pp. 206-226.
- Neveu E., 1996. – *Sociologie des mouvements sociaux*, Paris, La Découverte.
- Oberschall A., 1973. – *Social Conflicts and Social Movements*, Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs.
- Olson, M. 1965. – *The Logic of Collective Action*, Cambridge (Mas), Harvard University Press [*Logique de l'action collective*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1978].
- Pinot G., 1975. – *Mission d'information sur la prostitution*, Ministère des Droits de la Femme.

- Siméant J.**, 1998. – *La cause des sans-papiers*, Paris, Presses de Science Po.
- Snow D. A., Zurcher L. A., Jr., Ekland-Olson S.**, 1980. – “Social Networks in Social Movements: A Microstructural Approach to Differential Recruitment”, *American Sociological Review*, 45, pp. 787-801.
- Tarrow S.**, 1989. – *Democracy and Disorder. Protest and Politics in Italy, 1965-1975*, Oxford, Clarendon Press.
- Taylor J.**, 1998. – “Feminist Tactics and Friendly Fire in the Irish Women’s Movement”, *Gender & Society*, 12, 6, pp. 674-691.
- Tilly C.**, 1978. – *From Mobilization to Revolution*, New York, Random House.
- Voss K.**, 1996. – “The Collapse of a Social Movement: the Interplay of Mobilizing Structures, Framing, and Political Opportunities in the Knights of Labor”, in **D. McAdam, J. D. McCarthy, M. N. Zald** (eds.), *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp. 227-258.