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Author(s): Claire E. Ernst

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Activisme à l'américaine? The Case of Act Up-Paris

by Claire E. Ernst
Santa Clara University

INTRODUCTION

On December 10, 1989, some 4500 demonstrators from Act Up-New York interrupted a mass in New York City's St. Patrick's Cathedral by shouting invective, chaining themselves to pews, throwing condoms in the air, and lying down in the aisles. Militants of Act Up were protesting the Catholic Church's opposition to safe-sex education and to the promotion of the use of condoms. In the course of the demonstration a member of Act Up deliberately dropped a Communion wafer on the floor, spurring public outrage (*Newsday*, 12 December 1989).

Two years later, in Paris's Notre Dame Cathedral on All Saints Day, members of Act Up-Paris interrupted a mass shouting: "Sida, Eglise complice! La capote c'est la vie, l'Eglise l'interdit." Outside, members of Act Up-Paris unfurled a banner displaying a picture of the Pope with a bloody handprint on his head which read: "Oui aux capotes, Non aux sermons." *Actupiens* distributed tracts in the church yard criticizing the Church's position on AIDS prevention. Public reaction to this action featured expressions of outrage, with one politician calling it an "atteinte intolérable à la liberté de culte et à la liberté de conscience" (*Le Monde*, 4 November 1991).

Coincidence? Part of a concerted international effort to challenge the Catholic Church's position on AIDS prevention and the use of condoms? Self-conscious imitation of an American social movement? Despite the fact that there is no formal relationship between Act Up-Paris and Act Up-New York, Act Up-Paris has adopted many of its symbols, tactics, and actions: the pink triangle, slogans such as "Silence = Death" or "Anger = Action," "die-ins," and media zaps. The arrival of Act Up in France in the late 1980s marked a new phase of AIDS politics and mobilization. Until then, French AIDS organizations, although based in the gay community, had described themselves as general organizations and confined their activities to providing support services and to lobbying. With Act Up-Paris, AIDS was for the first time treated as an inherently political issue (rather than a general public health problem) and as an intrinsically gay issue as well.

Act Up-Paris looks very much like its American counterpart. Both American and French adherents are predominantly young, urban, gay males, both HIV negative and positive. French members sport the black T-shirts bearing the pink triangle with French versions of familiar American slogans: "Silence = Mort," "Action = Vie," "Colère = Action." The presence of such an "American" organization on French soil raises some interesting questions. Given popular resistance in France to American culture as well as conscious efforts within the French gay community to distinguish itself from the Amer-

ican one, how does it come to pass that the Parisian chapter of Act Up should become the largest and most militant in Europe? Is Act Up-Paris merely a formulaic iteration of the American version? Or has the French political and cultural context altered or modified the American model of Act Up, making it more French? Are we, perhaps, witnessing the Americanization of French social movement politics with the growth of Act Up-Paris?

Josh Gamson has argued that Act Up may be considered a new social movement par excellence and, indeed, the essential features of Act Up are consistent with those of new social movements (Gamson 1989). Its members tend to be young urban professional males, and it engages in a wide variety of “unconventional” actions. The movement is both expressive and instrumental, targeting government agencies and the scientific community on the one hand, and popular conventions on the other. Act Up seizes upon cultural stigma and stereotypes aimed at gays and people with HIV, and transforms them into weapons against the dominant culture that produced them. In so doing Act Up aims to transform the meaning of such labels. Rather than accept how the dominant culture defines them, members of Act Up insist on defining themselves. Rather than trying to de-homosexualize AIDS, Act Up embraces the links between the disease and homosexuality.

DIFFUSION THEORY AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

One means of exploring the appearance of Act Up in France is through the consideration of the diffusion of social movement ideas. Sociologists David Strang and John Meyer, in their study of the crossnational diffusion of policy, argue that diffusion can be understood as the socially mediated spread of some practice within a given population (Strang and Meyer 1993). Strang and Meyer observe that certain elements, such as institutional equivalence, shared cultural categories, and the media facilitate the transnational diffusion of ideas. Recently, Strang and Meyer’s work on the role of diffusion in policy innovation has been applied to the study of social movements. Doug McAdam and Dieter Rucht identify three criteria by which we may determine whether diffusion has played a role in social movement formation or practice (McAdam and Rucht 1993). First, there must be temporal evidence of diffusion. Second, these movements must have some shared or common elements in the form of slogans, themes, tactics, organizational form, and culture. Finally, it must be possible to identify the means of diffusion, be it relational (through direct contact) or non-relational (through the media). Marco Guigni has identified two important elements of diffusion: the channels through which it takes place, and the content of the ideas or practices diffused (Guigni 1995). Sidney Tarrow contends that successful diffusion is dependent on the political opportunity structure of the country in question (Tarrow 1996).

The general conditions for the diffusion of Act Up to Paris are more than propitious. First, both countries have a serious AIDS problem—France ranks second to the United States in the number of AIDS cases among industrial-

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ized countries. The demographics of the disease in both countries are quite similar: some 50-60 percent of AIDS cases occur among urban gay males, followed by some 20 percent among injection drug users. Second, the AIDS epidemic itself is an international phenomenon, has been the subject of annual scientific conferences and international research projects, and the focus of international organizational activity.

A consideration of the works of McAdam and Rucht, Guigni, and Tarrow on the diffusion of social movements leads quite easily to the conclusion that diffusion has indeed taken place in the case of Act Up-Paris. The formation of Act Up-Paris follows the creation of Act Up-New York by two years, and there is clear evidence that diffusion has taken place through formal and informal channels. There has been direct contact between Parisian *actupiens* and their American comrades, and a great deal of information regarding Act Up-New York has appeared in the French media. Founder Didier Lestrade traveled to New York numerous times between 1987 and 1989. Christophe Martet, president of Act Up-Paris from 1994 to 1996, joined Act Up-Paris in 1992 after spending 1991 in New York as a member of the group there. Act Up-Paris is itself quite candid about its use of Act Up-New York's symbols and tactics: "Act Up-Paris n'est pas né tout seul: nous avons un modèle" (Martet 1993: 11).

With evidence of temporal diffusion and of the necessary means of transmission, it remains to discover the content of the ideas that have been diffused. Act Up-Paris has adopted the symbol of the pink triangle as its own. While Act Up-New York was not the first social movement or organization in the gay community to use this symbol, its adoption of the pink triangle has led to the virtual identification of the group with this symbol. In addition to adopting the identifying symbol of Act Up, Act Up-Paris has also borrowed the slogans of its American counterpart. This is evident in the direct French translation of American slogans on Act Up-Paris's banners, posters, buttons, and T-shirts. "Silence = Death" becomes "Silence = Mort," "Action = Life" becomes "Action = Vie," and "Anger = Action" becomes "Colère = Action."

Not only are the symbols and slogans of Act Up-Paris identical to those of American Act Up, but many of the issues and themes that Act Up-Paris mobilizes around are common to Act Up on both sides of the Atlantic. Act Up-Paris, too, has centered its activities on bringing the public's and government's attention to the ways in which homophobia has colored policy response to the AIDS epidemic. As Act Up-Paris founder Didier Lestrade comments: "Dissocier les deux, c'est complètement chimérique!" (*Gai Pied Hebdo*, 4 April 1991, 52). Just as American chapters of Act Up accused the Reagan and Bush administrations of intentional neglect, Act Up-Paris faults government neglect and indifference for allowing the AIDS epidemic to reach such grave proportions in France. Act Up-Paris has also given a great deal of attention to the notion that the scientific and medical community has been indifferent to the needs of people with AIDS. Act Up-Paris contends

that pharmaceutical companies have been slow to develop or release new treatments, that they have profited from the disease at the expense of the dying, and that clinical trials have been closed to women, injection drug users, or immigrants with AIDS.

Act Up-Paris has employed many of the unconventional tactics used and developed by Act Up in New York and elsewhere in the United States. In Paris on December 1, 1993 (World AIDS Day) Act Up-Paris managed (with the financial support of Benetton) to place a giant pink condom over the Obélisque at the Place de la Concorde. On April 4, 1992 (designated by Act Up-Paris as a "Journée du désespoir"), members of Act Up chained themselves to the Chatelet Metro station, staged a "die-in" on the Avenue de l'Opéra to block traffic, dyed fountains red, and held another "die-in" at the Père Lachaise cemetery (with banners that read "Le Père Lachaise n'y suffira pas").

One form of action developed by Act Up in the United States and wholeheartedly adopted in Paris is the "zap" (Act Up-Paris 1994: 16). Essentially, a zap is an unconventional and often illegal action involving the identification of persons or organizations to be barraged by protest, either in person or by phone or fax. Thus, for instance, each month Act Up-Paris identifies "vos ennemis" in its monthly newsletter *Action* and provides their phone and fax numbers.

Nos ennemis sont nombreux . . . Par leur inaction, par leur négligence, par leurs erreurs ou par leur volonté de nuire, ils sont les complices du sida. Faites-le leur savoir. . . . Le zap téléphonique est l'un des modes d'action d'Act Up . . . Manifestez avec nous depuis chez vous. (*Action*, September 1992: 7)

Zaps include not just flooding an agency with phone calls, but the disruption of conferences or meetings (particularly if the press is to be present). One recipient of such attentions by Act Up-Paris was Professor Albert German, president of the French Academy of Pharmacy. Act Up interrupted the opening meeting of the Academy by shouting: "German, démission! German, assassin!" Professor German fled the meeting after being sprayed with fake blood, followed by a colleague who shouted: "Sales pédés, vous allez tous crever!" (*Gai Pied Hebdo*, 10 October 1991: 9).

Even when using what might be considered the more conventional types of actions available to social movements—pickets, protest marches, posterings, or the distribution of tracts and reports—Act Up-Paris has leant a certain dramatic flair to these undertakings. For example, a protest held on May 26, 1993, at the headquarters of the Laboratoires Roche, involved the throwing of fake blood and animal guts, as well as the stenciling of a skull and crossbones at the entrance of the Lab. "Die-ins" are also a frequent feature of Act Up protests. This variation on the sit-in literally involves protesters lying down and playing dead, resulting in the disruption of traffic and the temporary suspension of business operations.

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The organizational form taken by Act Up-Paris also mirrors that of its American counterparts. Weekly meetings are fairly unstructured and lengthy. These meetings are both a forum for the discussion of planned events and actions as well as an opportunity for members simply to express themselves. Decisions are made based on consensus, resulting in an often acrimonious and drawn out deliberative process. In addition to the weekly general meetings, working committees charged with specific issues meet separately. Act Up-Paris has seven *commissions spécialisées*, ten groups charged with the daily concerns of the organization, a lobbying committee, and a coordinating committee, and holds public forums regarding the latest information on treatment and research.

This relatively brief review of the symbols, slogans, themes, issues, tactics, and organizational forms used by Act Up-Paris indicates similarities between the American and French chapters of Act Up that must extend beyond mere coincidence. To the causal observer, Act Up-Paris seems to be little more than a French version of the American movement. This similarity is all the more remarkable given that there are no formal ties between the organizations. Act Up-New York does not actively seek the formation of satellite chapters either within the United States or in the world at large.

ANALYSIS

As students of social movements understand, the nature of mobilization depends heavily on the political context in which this collective action takes place. This political opportunity structure may be understood as a country's national cleavage structure, institutional structure, political alliance structure, and political discourse (Eisinger 1973, Kriesi et al 1995, MacAdam 1982, and Tarrow 1994). Three key features of French politics and institutions are generally held to make French social movement politics exceptional: the structure of state institutions, the electoral system and party politics, and the Republican tradition. These distinctive features of the French political opportunity structure are commonly held to act as impediments to collective action. First, a strong, centralized state with a highly professionalized and closed administrative branch has limited social groups' access to the policymaking process, contributing to the explosive character of collective action in France. The "exclusive" character of the French state discourages stable or long-term social movement organization because the chances of successful action and meaningful interaction are so slight.

Second, a majority ballot system tends to discourage social movement access by polarizing politics into two camps on the Left and Right (Duyvendak 1995). This bipolar competition means that, overall, parties are unwilling to incorporate social movement demands into their platforms for fear of losing support from the center. The structural constraints placed on social movement formation by the French electoral system are particularly acute on the political Left, the traditional ally of new social movements. Finally, the Republican tradition has acted as a constraint on social movement formation

and actions in France through the notion that there is no acceptable intermediary between the individual citizen and the state. The involvement of interest groups and social movements in politics is frowned upon and their access to policymaking is consequently strictly controlled by the centralized state. Under this Republican tradition all particular identities—whether based on region, ethnicity, religion, gender, or sexual orientation—are considered a threat to the direct relationship between a universal citizenry and the state.

The success of Act Up-Paris suggests that it has developed under favorable political conditions. What, then, are the essential features of Act Up-Paris's political opportunity structure? Two elements of the French political opportunity seem most important to the case of Act Up-Paris: the Republican tradition and party politics. The central importance of the Republican tradition is evident in the specific character of the French gay community. While the development of the French gay movement in the 1970s resulted in a thriving gay subculture, it did not simultaneously generate a politically constituted gay community. At the outbreak of AIDS in 1982 there was effectively no organized gay community in France, nor any organization claiming to speak on behalf of gay men.

Act Up-Paris's success has also been contingent upon the structure of French party politics. Act Up-Paris was formed during the Rocard Government (1989-1991) and found a favorable political climate for its identity-based mobilization. This period was characterized by increased governmental attention to AIDS prevention, the creation of links between government agencies and AIDS organizations, and a general proliferation of AIDS organizations. But this was a brief period of favorable government. For the most part, French AIDS activists have found few political allies. The Left avoided or abandoned ties with the gay community once it gained a political majority, and the Right has been more directly hostile to the demands of AIDS organizations when in power.

Thus, the success of Act Up-Paris would seem to defy the general contours of the French political opportunity structure with which it has been presented. The gay community offers little in the way of institutional support, AIDS organizations shy away from addressing the political links between AIDS and homosexuality, a prominent form of political discourse discourages the formation of identity-based politics, and the epidemic has been marked by a frequent lack of sympathetic governments. Act Up-Paris's success despite these hindrances is in part the result of the fact that the target of its actions has not exclusively been the State. Some of its best successes have been on its cultural agenda—the generation of a public awareness of AIDS, the creation of a positive image of gay identity, and the politicization of gay identity. Yet even in the realm of material demands, Act Up-Paris has had a significant measure of success by gaining official representation on numerous government AIDS committees and by influencing the behavior of pharmaceutical companies and AIDS researchers.

AIDS AND GAY IDENTITY IN FRANCE

Links between AIDS and homosexuality in popular culture have been received quite differently by the American and French gay communities. In the United States, Act Up has appropriated stigmatizing associations between the disease and homosexuality and converted them into a form of empowerment. This practice is manifested in the adoption of the term “queer” as a self-ascribed and proudly held identity, rather than as a negative label to be avoided. French AIDS associations have been on the whole reluctant to draw attention to or utilize any connections made between AIDS and homosexuality. The largest AIDS organization in France, *Aides*, has consistently insisted upon being considered a general AIDS organization, despite the fact that it is staffed primarily by gay men and serves a primarily gay clientele.

This practice of generalizing AIDS has been challenged in France by Act Up-Paris. Act Up-Paris is quite candid about its base in the gay community. For Act Up-Paris, AIDS is by definition as much a gay issue as it is a health problem. “Act Up est la seule association de lutte contre le sida à avoir toujours revendiqué son lien avec la communauté homosexuelle. A la base de notre action, il y a la conviction que l’homophobie fait le jeu du sida” (*Action*, June 1993: 2). Act Up-Paris’s embrace of the links between AIDS and homosexuality has resulted in a politicization of AIDS itself, as well as in renewed attention to the issue of French gay politics. Prior to the creation of Act Up-Paris, both the gay community and government made efforts to treat AIDS as a non-political issue. This *dédramatisation* was conceived as a means of avoiding AIDS-related hysteria and panic, and of minimizing the discriminatory consequences of being identified as a person with AIDS. Act Up, on the other hand, has consistently portrayed AIDS as a *political* problem.

This politicization of gay identity has been particularly apparent in the controversy surrounding Act Up-Paris’s participation in annual Gay Pride parades. Act Up’s participation in Gay Pride events has generated disputes regarding whether an event celebrating gay liberation ought to be publicly linked with the AIDS epidemic. Act Up-Paris welcomes such controversy, seeing itself as a gadfly for the French gay community—“Nous sommes un moteur avant-gardiste” (*Gai Pied Hebdo*, 24 September 1992: 10). As the self-appointed vanguard of the gay community, Act Up-Paris has introduced the question of whether or not the issue of gay rights is an appropriate concern of not just AIDS organizations but the gay community at large. In this respect, Act Up-Paris may be considered to mark the intersection of the AIDS epidemic with gay politics in France.

Ultimately, Act Up-Paris cannot strictly be considered an AIDS movement nor solely a part of the gay movement. And perhaps this defiance of categorization by Act Up-Paris is not entirely accidental. Act Up-Paris has consistently jockeyed between the two camps, playing them against each other. “Il fallait pour que s’engage une lutte contre le sida . . . que la communauté pédé fasse du mouvement homo un mouvement de lutte contre le sida et de la lutte

contre sida une lutte homo" (Act Up-Paris, 1994: 209). Act Up-Paris illustrates the profound manner in which it is AIDS that has mobilized and politicized the French gay community, rather than the reverse. AIDS has organized the French gay community, pushing it to consider the political aspects of its identity. The ambiguous and overlapping relationship between gay identity and AIDS remains a central feature of organized response to the epidemic in France, captured with remarkable clarity in the actions of Act Up-Paris.

CONCLUSION

The case of Act Up-Paris clearly supports the conclusion that a diffusion of social movement ideas and forms has taken place in France. What seems most intriguing about the diffusion of Act Up from the United States to France is the manner in which these forms have been incorporated into French social movement politics. The successful adoption of Act Up's ideas and forms illustrates that traditional oppositions or impediments to identity-based politics and social movements may be eroding in France. It furthermore suggests that commonly accepted notions of France as inhospitable to new social movements may have to be modified to accommodate the strength and vitality of Act Up-Paris.

Act Up-Paris's importance lies in its capacity to spur consideration of the question of identity politics in France. It has done so by participating in Gay Pride events and insisting on loud declarations of the links between AIDS and the gay community and between the management of the epidemic and homophobia. Discussions within Act Up-Paris regarding its relationship with other AIDS organizations and gay organizations reflect a preoccupation with the ways in which gay identity mediates one's experience with AIDS. As far as Act Up-Paris is concerned, AIDS has rendered gay identity political by linking homosexuality with an object of policymaking. The vitality of Act Up-Paris suggests that the Republican tradition's ability to impede or discourage identity-based politics may be weakening (Blatt 1995). Indeed, it is the identity-based nature of Act Up-Paris that has made its success distinctive.

Given the adverse political conditions and the traditionally closed quality of the French state to social movements, there would seem to be little opportunity for movement success in influencing AIDS policy. Yet because many of the goals of Act Up-Paris do not require state action, state response to the movement has been in some manner superfluous. In the past, French new social movements have been traditionally marginalized or institutionalized by the state, often through reform. Act Up-Paris's non-material and non-traditional status have made such a scenario less likely.

Yet Act Up-Paris's material success cannot be overlooked. Particularly in the arena of drug treatment, Act Up-Paris demanded and received quite specific actions on the part of the state, scientific community and pharmaceutical industry. AIDS researchers and pharmaceutical companies have in some

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instances proved more permeable to social movement activity than the French state. Even at the level of government policy regarding AIDS treatment, Act Up-Paris must be regarded as having achieved a significant measure of success, as exemplified by its representation on Agence nationale de la recherche sur le sida committees regarding research and clinical trials. The bombastic and combative style of Act Up-Paris has brought a level of access to government policymaking that more traditional forms could not have achieved alone. Act Up-Paris is increasingly regarded as performing a necessary role as *provocateur* by other, more pragmatic AIDS organizations.

The achievements of Act Up-Paris suggest that new social movement activity in France is more possible than previously supposed. Furthermore, Act Up-Paris demonstrates the receptivity of French society and politics to diffused social movement forms and activities. Given the right circumstances—shared issues, common political and cultural institutions, access to information, not to mention a common problem (the AIDS epidemic)—the diffusion of social movement practices can result in what in the case of Act Up-Paris seems to be an almost wholesale adoption of these practices. In a world that is increasingly confronted with the question of “multiculturalism” Act Up-Paris suggests that traditional French resistance to such models of citizenship may be eroding. Ironically, what we may be seeing in the case of Act Up-Paris is the “Americanization” of the French gay movement and of French social movement politics more generally.

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