

Geopolitics of youth policy in post-war Western Europe (1945-1967)

by Giuseppe Porcaro

The genesis of the institutional landscape of European youth movements is a fascinating field of research which has still not been completely disclosed. It opens up interesting points of reflection in various fields: from the history of European integration to the evolution of social movements, from the rise of a transnational civil society at European and global levels to the changing notion of citizenship. The list could be even longer.

In this short article, I sketch out an approach that combines history with political geography. In particular, I outline how the emergence of a European youth policy field has been influenced by the power relations embedded in the system of international relations. At the same time, I describe how, almost paradoxically, this geopolitical situation laid the basis for the consolidation of an independent youth civil society as one of the main features of the youth policy landscape in Europe. This is only a first attempt to approach this issue from this perspective. In this regards, it constitutes mostly a seminal work that requires further intellectual and historical investigation.

(re)Construction

The initial youth organisations emerged in Germany towards the end of the 19th century as marginal social movements in reaction to the problems of Wilhelminian society but without a political agenda for reform. They gradually became, in the first half of the 20th century, under the influence of the more disciplinary British youth movements, engaged in the national politics of societal reform. As youth organisations became powerful elements of mass culture, their political importance culminated in the 1930s with their adoption by the modern state. In their efforts to influence society through the practices of hiking and camping, the youth movements in pre-World War II Europe can be understood as key elements in the project of modern governance which employed the cultural meanings of landscape and community to mobilise youth at national level, and to eventually turn them into governable subjects.

This incorporation by the modern nation state of youth movements led to political distortions and manipulations that became evident after World War II. Lessons were drawn from the most evident cases of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, but also with the incorporation of youth movements in the Soviet regime and its satellites. In this context it is not surprising that most Western European governments pulled out from an active engagement in youth policy development and left the field to youth organisations themselves.



At the same time, something was happening at the international level: the use of youth organisations by the system of international relations. In London in 1945 the youth movements coming from the states signatories of the United Nations Charter formed the World Federation of Democratic Youth (WFDY). However, the dream of a unified world youth constituency suddenly collapsed with the beginning of the Cold War. Almost all Western organisations pulled out of WFDY due to its association with Soviet-aligned socialist and communist parties. In 1948 a World Assembly of Youth (WAY) was established, this time only with those movements which were outside the Soviet sphere of influence. This clearly established two sides in international youth affairs and tied them to the geopolitical reality of the time. International youth work was definitely situated in the realm of foreign policy and youth organisations became sensitive actors and forerunners in keeping channels of contact open between the two sides.



The New York Times

Campaigning for Europe

The biggest absence of this first period was Europe. Europe was under construction (and still is). To begin with, it was divided. It was also entirely immersed in the logic of the Cold War. However, the European project was about to take its first steps and from the European Movement International and the World Assembly of Youth came the first big wave of Europeanisation of youth organisations: the European Youth Campaign.

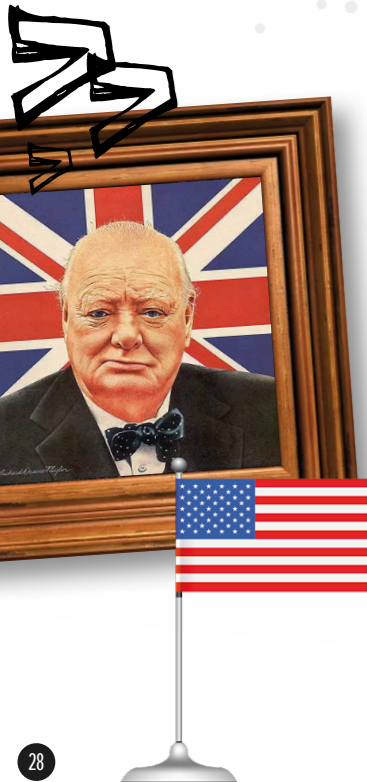
This campaign, launched in 1951, supported a series of conferences, cultural events, and youth organisations aimed to promote a European identity among youth from all over the (western) part of the continent. The campaign was funded as a part of post-war reconstruction, by the American Committee on United Europe, again in the context of the Cold War to consolidate Western European democracies and co-operation within 'free' Europe. The campaign was definitely a success, not only for the dissemination of books, events and constituting a cultural 'humus' for European co-operation but also because it allowed for the creation of the first European Youth Platform.

'The Council of European National Youth Committees (CENYC) was founded on 23 March 1963 in London as a voluntary association of eleven national committees of the World Assembly of

Youth (WAY) (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Iceland, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Turkey and the United Kingdom) and the National Youth Councils of France and Luxembourg. Italy and Switzerland participated at the founding meeting, but only decided later to participate in the CENYC.

The principal tasks of CENYC were to serve as a forum for the exchange of information, to collect and study material concerning youth problems, to co-operate and obtain assistance from organisations and institutions active in the field of youth work and education and to support national youth committees in activities aiming at European unification'.¹

The creation of CENYC was the bridge towards the next phase of development of European Youth Policy. If on one hand it allowed for the co-ordination among 'Western' national youth platforms in the frame of the WAY, it also crystallised two important principles. Firstly, the independence of national youth councils from their governments, which would become one of the constituting pillars of the youth sector of civil society. Secondly, the institutional dialogue towards the new European institutions: one of the first resolutions of CENYC, already in 1964, was to ask the Council of Europe for the creation of a European Youth Centre.



The young, the student and the CIA

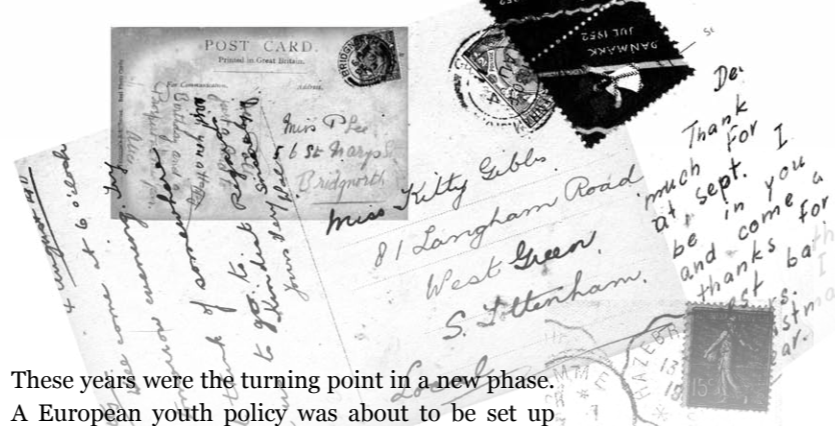
By the mid-1960s the system was quite consolidated. But soon this was shaken. On 15 February 1967, *The New York Times* published a short but explosive article with a self-explanatory title 'Foundations linked to CIA are found to subsidise 4 other youth organisations'. Nothing really new was revealed. But it was now public. In particular, the article showed how the 'Foundation for Youth and Students Affairs' was subsidising the World Assembly of Youth, the United States Youth Council and the International Student Conference (the Western counterpart of the soviet-led International Student Union).

The echo of the revelations of *The New York Times* crossed the ocean very fast. European governments and youth organisations could not stay silent on the matter.

Most youth organisations wanted to clearly create distance and emphasise their independence from CIA funding. This resulted in a first disempowerment of the WAY and the consolidation of CENYC as an independent self-funded platform.

European governments, which thus far had avoided mixing too much with international youth policy, started to play a more proactive role. Youth was suddenly re-discovered as a crucial actor. This was not only the consequence of the confrontation between East and West and the role played by youth groups. Only a few months after the CIA affair, students and young people were marching on the streets in 1968. The 'youth issue' was definitely a priority for domestic policy as well.

These years were the turning point in a new phase. A European youth policy was about to be set up (with different approaches) by the Council of Europe and, a bit later on, by the European Communities. However, the Cold War continued to play a crucial role until the end of the 1980s. East/West relations were the main focus of the pan-European youth dialogue which was developed after the Helsinki Agreement of 1975. However this time the Western European field definitely acted more independently from the US than in the earlier phase, when we saw direct intervention and support.



(partial) Conclusions

What is the sense of looking back at what happened 60 years ago? There are several lessons that we could already draw from this short introduction.

Firstly, this historical moment reminds us that investments in the youth sector of civil society (or the lack of) are strategic choices of governments and institutions. This should, in my opinion, sound as a reminder for these actors to continue giving the necessary support to youth civil society especially at a moment of increased individualisation in public life. Secondly, this episode traces the origin of a dialectic between the different stakeholders and the origins of the first independent youth organisations, which have now been, after decades, institutionalised and rebalanced. In particular it illustrates the very beginning of a story that would lead to the creation of the European Youth Forum in 1996. Last (but not least) it shows how youth policy had and still has a role in challenging the concept of the nation state, contributing to the creation of what we call in political geographical studies an International European scale.

I think these three lessons are important to plan strategically for the future of youth work and youth policy in Europe. In a period of economic crisis, young people are becoming more and more subjected to policy making. They are policy consumers, not policy producers. The recent launching of the new European Commission flagship initiative, Youth on the Move, is an example of this trend. Participatory youth work risks being challenged and investments in participation and in the youth sector of civil society might be sidelined to the advantage of other important priorities. In this situation, the delicate balance among actors can easily break to the advantage of state-oriented top-down policies. It is perhaps time for brave decisions. Besides the difference in numbers, the positive value of the contribution to European societies by independent youth organisations is definitely as strong and strategic as it was 60 years ago!

Methodological and bibliographical note

This is only a seminal contribution that would require more research on this specific historical period, but should also include more in-depth research on the past 60 years of the history of European youth movements and youth policy. I will not give an extensive bibliography but some guiding references. Concerning the role of youth movements in the building of the modern nation state it is worth reading the works on the nationalisation of the masses by George Mosse. Very little has been written so far on the European Youth Campaign, but it is traceable in many books that speak about the history of the European Movement International. A lot of information is also included in the gold mines of the archives of CENYC which are hosted at the European University Institute in Florence.

