

Reflections on risks and opportunities for youth participation in the field of democracy and political participation

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I. Democracy in Europe

1. Risk / Challenge: Post-democracy

Colin Crouch's (2004) bestseller "Post-democracy" illustrates a preoccupation that is widely shared: *while formal democracy is now solidly established in a record number of countries, the wealth and substance of democracy has considerably declined in the last decades*. Economic globalization that puts states in competition and jeopardizes their tax system and welfare state; the rising concentration of money in the hand of the very influential "1%" that now owns more wealth than the rest of humanity and the "marketization" of electoral politics goes together with the classic phenomena of a progressive loss of interest in politics by many citizens. EU institutions are indeed often painted as both a "paradise for corporate lobbies" (Corporate Europe Observatory, 2012) and as a place where bureaucrats and experts took over most of the power of elected representatives and citizens.

Worries about a decline of citizens' participations both at the national and European levels have been confirmed with recent 2014 European elections, marked by high abstention rates and by far right nationalist parties achieving more success in many countries. Distrust towards formal politics and the European Union is particularly strong among young people. While young citizens used to be the age category most favourable to the EU, distrust towards EU and its institutions has considerably risen in the aftermath of the post-2008 crisis. The 2012 Eurobarometer shows that 50% of young people distrusted the EU in 2012; almost 50% of them consider that things are going in the wrong direction in the EU (see also Willems et al. 2013).

The challenge of democracy in Europe and the future of Europe are deeply connected. Among young progressive activists in Europe, the sense of social agency at a specific level (local, national, European or global) is a determining factor for their identity construction at a particular scale. The sense of social agency at the European level plays a major role in the disdain for the European Union and the European identity among progressive young activists (Pleyers, 2015). The more activists believe they may have an impact on EU policies, the more they feel European. On the contrary, those who are convinced that the European institutions pay no attention to civil society arguments and will stick to their neoliberal agenda do not feel very European, nor consider Europe as an important scale of action. The development of new ways of participation for young people and the renewal of democracy at the European scale are thus urgent challenges for those who wish to reconcile young people with the European identity and the European project.

2. Opportunities: a renewal of democracy

The move downwards from the "peak of democracy" – that Colin Crouch places in post-war Western countries – is confirmed by many indicators. However, the first part of the 21st century is also a period of the rise of *a wide range of citizens initiatives, campaigns and concrete practices that contribute to the expansion of democratic practices and democratic considerations in all realms of life*.

a. Protest: denounce the symptoms of post-democracy

Young people are far from apathetic but participate mostly in non-conventional ways. Both in Western and Eastern Europe, they took a leading role in movements that pointed to the actual and structural limitations of representative democracy and the symptoms of post-democracy at the national and

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European levels. They have denounced an “*empty democracy*”, considering that policies with any real impact on their lives are settled within circles upon which citizens have no impact.

In Spain, the 15M movement started as a denunciation of a ‘democracy without choice’; many citizens felt that the 2011 general elections did not offer a choice between real alternatives. Over Europe, the Indignados and Occupy movements in Western Europe denounced the rising inequalities as a threat for democracy. A wide range of similar movements for a deeper democracy also emerged in Central and Eastern Europe, testifying the rise of a “second generation” of democratic movements (Pleyers & Sava, 2015; Jacobsson, 2015), after the 1989 protest waves and in opposition to the “NGOization” of civil society in the region. In 2013, young people took a leading role in the creative protests reclaiming more democracy in Sofia (Baruh, 2015). There were also mass protests against the political corruption that led to the approval of a gold mining project in Romania and against law projects that endanger the freedom of expression in Hungary. Youth have also reclaimed fair elections and more democracy in Moscow and St-Petersburg, and massively mobilized in Armenia. Across Europe, these movements emerged partly as a “generation movement”, as it mobilized young citizens belonging to a generation that has grown up in a neoliberal environment of income insecurity with diminished welfare state, where neither work nor public services can be taken for granted.

b. Practices: Exploring and implementing democracy

Young people involved in most of these movements dedicated overall much less energy to protest against the government and the limits of institutional democracy than to explore and implement alternative forms of democracy on the squares, in neighbourhood or in daily life. They consider democracy not only as a claim addressed to the government but as a personal commitment that must be embodied in concrete practices.

Democracy and political participation has thus to be understood in a much broader way than voting in elections or taking part in a protest. Many young people opt for “prefigurative activism” based on a strong consistency between their practices and values. Some implement direct democracy in decision making processes and place experimentations in horizontal and participatory discussion and deliberation processes at the core of their activism whether in activists’ camps, neighborhoods, thematic working groups or online deliberations. Occupied squares or neighborhood meetings become “spaces of experience”, understood “*as places sufficiently autonomous and distanced from capitalist society and power relations which permit actors to live according to their own principles, to knit different social relations and to express their subjectivity*” (Pleyers, 2010). Beyond opposing neoliberalism, these camps provide spaces for socializing, sharing ideas and experiences, celebrating, mixing private and public, making friends and struggling for a better world.

In recent years, occupations of disputed territories to oppose infrastructure projects have also multiplied across Europe. They combine the practices and culture of young alter-activists camps with elements of transition and protest activism. The protest against the Rosia Montania gold mine project in Romania connected rural and urban protests and had a deep impact on civil society. In France, thousands of young people have occupied territories to oppose infrastructure projects and explore alternative ways of life in the “ZAD – Zone à défendre” (“Area to be defended”). The occupied territory becomes both a space of resistance and direct confrontation and a space of experience where direct democracy organization and ecological practices are implemented.

Daily-life itself is another arena of political participation and social transformation. Young people are often more interested in cultural / lifestyle change than in the mechanisms of institutional politics. Daily life provides spaces to participate in multiple ways, including critical consumption (local food, de-growth, veganism...), that have been invested by many young people. They consider that the roots of social change thus lie in a change of one’s lifestyle and in alternative practices at the local level and that it is their personal responsibility to lower their impact on the environment. Young “transition activists” combine a concern to build oneself, a major challenge of late youth, a deep concern for global challenges, whether human rights, democracy or global warming, and a will to root their life and activism in local spaces of life (neighborhood, university, affinity groups...).

Beyond the private/public frontier, these young progressive activists provide ways to live democracy as an experience, a practice and a personal commitment. They remind us that democracy lies not only in citizens' active participation in public decision making but also in a way of life that is not limited to the relations between citizens and the state. It is an emancipation project that lies in "people practices oriented towards the presupposition of the equality of anyone with anyone" (Rancière, 1998: 15), which takes a particular meaning today with refugees and migrants. Rather than big discourses, many young people choose to take concrete action.

II. From indignation to institution?

1. Risk/Challenge: the gap between youth and institutions

A major challenge of democracy in the first part of the 21st century lies in the wide gap and the profound misunderstanding between what institutions and what young people mean by participation. Many young transition activists share mistrust towards institutions in general, and fear that scaling up their activities at the national or European level will lead to the institutionalization that they are trying to avoid.

Part of the problem lies in the *gap between the institutional vision about youth participation and the experience-oriented practices of participation privileged by young people*. Many young people prefer cultural and personal forms of political commitment and experience-based, expressive and horizontal ways of participation. Their focus on experience, loose structure and horizontality is little compatible with an institutional perspective. Many young people are generally distrustful of institutions which embody, in their eyes, a 'top-down', state-centred approach to political life which they reject. Representation itself is contested by some young activists, as stated by the slogan "They don't represent me". They seek to construct autonomous spaces of experience outside institutions, where they implement participatory values and share their opinions and personal experiences, such as social movements or square assemblies or social media.

This gap often results in deep misunderstandings between active young citizens and institutions. On one side, many young activists develop monolithic and often very simplified views of institutions, and in some case even a rejection of all intervention by institutions and all dialogue with political and institutional actors. On the other side, institutions fail to consider these forms of political participation as genuine participation. In addition of existing training for young people to understand EU institutions, Sofia Laine (2012) thus suggests that trainings should also target institutional actors and offer them elements for a better understanding of young people.

2. New opportunities / New challenges: to combine forms of participation

Prefigurative actions, practices of direct or responsible democracy bring insightful answers to some limits of representative democracy, but they also have their limits. Concrete actions at the local scale bring some important changes, but may not prohibit economic, social, food or environmental policies to mobilize resources in the opposite direction. **Is it possible to change the world without transforming institutions? Many of the recent movements are also confronted with one of the limits inherent in loosely structured movements** (Mathieu, 2011: 40): they can initiate and orchestrate citizens' mobilizations as a substitute for established organizations of civil society, but they are unable to close the struggle because they are not used to negotiating and signing agreements emerging from conflict, and will not claim to represent a political body.

While the first years of the "2010s movements" in Europe were dominated by anti-institutional stances, the main challenges of some processes and actors that have emerged since 2013 seems to be the combination rather than the opposition of different forms of participation and models of democracy.

Various attempts to combine direct and representative democracy have been conducted by youth movements explorations in recent years. In Germany and Northern Europe, the Pirate party invited its members to vote online and decide the stances that its elected activists would adopt in the local or regional assemblies. After some electoral successes, the party failed to manage the tensions between the feature of representative and direct democracy. In Italy, the 5 Stars party claimed to transform

politics based on horizontal and participatory practices but soon became dominated by its authoritarian leader.

In Spain, the young indignados that occupied the squares in 2011 created the new political party “Podemos” with the aim to translating the practices of direct democracy to institutional politics. They also face the challenges of the move from indignation to organization and from a horizontal movement to a party with a strong charismatic leader. Rather than contesting representative democracy, these movements may be considered as exploring ways to complement representative democracy and empower citizenship. The combination of informal practices and institutional democracy remains however a major challenge.

The latest elections of the UK Labour party leader offer another illustration of the impact and surprising forms of the intrusion of young progressive activists in the formal political arena. In 2011, when they occupied St-Paul square in London and other city squares around the country, they opted for ways of “anti-politics”, direct democracy and opposed institutional forms of participation. Four years later, young people brought a numerous and enthusiastic support to a 66 year-old “old-style” leftwing politician. He didn’t gain this support from a savvy use of social media and geeks technologies, nor by transforming his campaign meetings into trendy shows. He mobilized young people by proposing an alternative political message to a generation that has suffered austerity policies as well as by embodying a personal ethics and authenticity. Is that a “new way of doing politics”?

III. Risk & opportunity: online participation. Beyond the online/offline divides²

In order to understand the role of the Internet in the 2010s young people mobilizations, we need to transcend oppositions between the ‘virtual’ world of cyber-activism and the ‘real’ world of mobilization on the streets and squares. Activists often condemn “clicktivism” as a form of online activism that is out of touch with reality and that gives the impression of participation even though it only has a narrow impact on society (Cardon, 2010; Morozov, 2013). Paulo Gerbaudo (2012) reminds us that, in the streets of Cairo as well as in New York, those who occupy the squares insist on being distanced from “those who comment and ‘like’ on Facebook” and they rally to “get people off the Internet”.

Beyond the over-emphasis on the power of Internet, recent movements point to three main features of movements of our times.

1. The use of Internet has not led to a predominance of virtual actions and movements over mobilizations in ‘physical space’. On the contrary, since 2011, the occupation of urban public spaces - and more particularly symbolic spaces - *has been a major feature of* these movements.
2. Though the Internet is a global virtual space, the use of social networks by activists has actually rather contributed to the construction of national and local movements.
3. The social networks and the Internet have not replaced mass media. Our media ecology consists in a superposition and some articulation of mass media, social media and alternative media. Alternative and activist media have reached the largest audience when they linked up with mass media.

IV. The rise of conservative youth and of far right movements, parties and values

Democracy in Europe and the EU itself find themselves under criticisms from two opposite sides. On one side, progressive young activists consider that the EU embodies the symptoms of post-democracy and hasn’t fulfilled the democratization promises on which it was founded. On the other side, EU institutions and identity also suffer criticisms from far right parties and movements, that mobilize many young citizens, both in Western and Central & Eastern Europe, both in the wealthy North (Sweden, UK) and in South Europe (Italy, Greece...).

While youth is often identified with progressive movements and values, all young people are not progressive. In his analysis of Youth in the 2008 European Value Survey, Bernard Roudet already pointed to a “general tendency of values across generations coming closer³”. More recently, we have

² This point is developed in the text “Facebook movements or square movements?”, In: Emmy Barouh, “The Protesters”, Sofia: New Bulgarian University Press, pp. 104-109

³ “Une tendance générale au rapprochement des valeurs entre les générations”

seen thousands of young people joining the marches against same sex marriage in France or Spain, with the same energy and the same repertory of action as their progressive counterparts: creative direct action, humour, sit in...

We should distinguish two phenomena here that sometimes combine in the same protest or under the same vote, but are analytically different: a rise of conservatism values among youth and the rise of extreme right movements and parties among young citizens.

All the active young citizens are not in favour of more democratic and open values. Extreme right parties and far right cultural movements have also attracted many young people, both in Western and in Central and Eastern Europe, from True Finns and the French National Front to Pole neo-fascists. Two far right parties, the Danish People's Party (DFP) and the French National Front (FN), became the biggest parties at their national levels at the 2014 European elections, with a high tool among young voters. We should study them with the same conceptual tools as those we use to understand progressive activists, including the analytical focus on subjectivity, the construction of oneself, new information and communication technologies... Various ethnographic analyses show indeed that they successfully combine nationalist identities and global networks, traditional values and very modern repertory of action, including online activism, youth culture and expressive/creative forms of activism (e.g. Toscano & Di Nunzio on CasaPound in Italy). Likewise, social media provide young people with a tool to participate in democratic debates. However, it has also become a public space to spread racism that is not allowed in other public spaces.

V. The challenge of social inequalities

While some challenges towards a better participation of young people in representative democratic processes are common among this age category, other are specific to different categories of young people. Classic socio-demographic categories (gender, social classes, ethnic dimension...) have also a significant impact. A challenge of major importance for democracy is the inclusion of "*excluded youth*", notably those from poorer socio-economic background, discriminated ethnic groups and suburbs. In Southern Europe, this category has extended with the economic crisis. Therefore, policies to foster youth participation should thus target specific sectors of young people and help them to overcome specific barriers or take into account their specific modes of participation.

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Annexes: From Facebook movements to Square movements