

**Young people as citizens in the making:
ambivalences and ambiguities of participation**

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Introduction

The following reflections focus on the ambiguities and ambivalences of young people's participation. Although participation is being referred to as reinforcing and innovating active citizenship in most programmes and policy discourses it remains limited to superficial rhetoric. At the same time it coincides with the discourse of the activating welfare state which underlines individual self-responsibility for the own social and labour market integration; in most cases without assuring the necessary resources and opportunities of individuals. Both perspectives imply that young people apparently do not follow societal expectations in terms of citizenship rights and responsibilities. This perspective leads to questioning the subjective meaning of participation within the biographies of the young people themselves. Our starting point is that current discourses refer to a narrow concept of participation while many actual activities of young people are not acknowledged as attempts of participation or even stigmatised as deviant, riskful or as criminal acts. Our reflections are based on two EU-funded research projects:

- The project *Youth Policy and Participation (YOYO)* was concerned with the motivational careers of disadvantaged youth in transitions to work and the impact of possibilities of participation in this respect. It consisted of reports on the National transitions systems, biographical interviews with 300 young people on their transition experiences and 27 case studies on participatory projects for young people in transitions to work. It was funded under the EU's 5th Framework Programme for Research 2001-2004 (Walther et al. 2006; see also www.iris-egris.de/yoyo).
- The project *Youth – Actor of Social Change (UP2YOUTH)* was concerned with the relationship between young people's agency and social change. Funded as a Coordinated Action under the 6th Framework Programme for Research (2006-2009), three thematic working groups carried out secondary analysis with regard to the topics young parenthood, transitions to work in a migration society, and youth participation (Loncle & Muniglia 2008; see also www.up2youth.org).

In the following, we will first clarify our understanding of participation and its relation to social integration in late modern societies. Second we will present some findings on participation in relation to the areas of education, transitions to work and youth culture. Third, we will briefly reflect on the findings in a comparative perspective. Finally, we will conclude by some reflections regarding the way participation should be addressed by youth policy and youth research.

Citizenship and participation: reorientation or decline of young people's engagement?

We have chosen to treat the concepts participation and active citizenship as complementary

"...inasmuch as it refers to individuals' rights connected to the status of citizens in democratic societies. Participation implies an at least partial correspondence between individual and collective, active negotiation between personal interest and societal demands and thereby processes identification." (Biggart et al. 2006, p. 12).

If young people are not fully involved into societal decision-making processes and into actively shaping the social "pact" between the generations, it is argued, endangers the social system itself. Across European societies there is considerable concern that nowadays' young generation does neither show enthusiasm for collective issues nor is interested in politics. While this is being interpreted as threatening the system of representative democracy (IARD 2001), comparative studies of voting patterns reveal that this decline does not only hold for the

younger but also for the older generations and that differences are bigger between young people from different countries than between younger and older people within the same country (Spannring et al. 2008). The fact that young people's choices and activities are more often centred around limited sociality than around collective effort (Loncle & Muniglia 2008) rather than representing an assumed crisis of value must be interpreted with regard to social change in terms of individualisation. The relationship between individual lives and motivations on the one hand and collective values and engagement on the other is increasingly being blurred.

It appears as if young people's choices represent an increasing search for authentic personal relationships, familiar peer constellations and the sphere of intimacy while at the same time they increasingly feel that engaging in the traditional channels and institutions of representative democracy is neither useful nor effective. In contrast, the latter is perceived as an obsolete mode of "doing politics". Therefore, a reflection on what participation means subjectively in the biographical experiences of young people; also with regard to the sociocultural prerequisites which it requires and the structural barriers of access.

With regard to young people's *political participation*, however, it is often argued that formal forms of participation such as voting or membership in political parties are being replaced by non-institutional and self-organised forms of engagement related to specific topics (globalisation, environment, poverty, human rights) rather than to specific organisations. While opting for alternative forms of political engagement, groups such as anti-globalist activists stick to the themes of the official political agenda (Spannring et al. 2008). In this regard, some empirical evidence exists which calls for widening the concept of participation. However, at the same time it should not be over-estimated as it still applies only to a small minority of young people; more often those with higher qualifications.

But what about other activities of young people? According to the European Commission's White Paper, participation of young people includes involvement "in the decisions which concern them and, in general, the life of their communities" (European Commission 2001, p. 8). The findings of the two studies suggest that young people do not participate because they perceive contents of participation programmes as hardly relevant for their life worlds. They do not participate if they do not believe if their effort can do any difference and if they think to have little influence on the processes and institutions which affect their lives. They do not participate if they lack opportunities and spaces for individual initiative due to the over-institutionalisation of social life and public space (cf. Matthews, 2001; IARD, 2001; Walther et al. 2006).

This leads to the question what actually is and should be understood as participation. The widespread debate has led to an inflationary use of the word participation reaching from passive and formalised attendance (e.g. of education) to active exercise of rights and power with regard to the own life or the own community. In order to clarify the understanding of participation two principal dimensions should be distinguished:

1. *Active versus passive*: Whereas the *passive* participation refers to attendance or participation in formal procedures (elections), *active* participation refers to the conscious influence of individuals in defining and realising policies which meet subjective needs and interests.
2. *Objective versus principle*: With regard to young people, participation is often referred to as an *objective* in later (adult) life for which they need to be prepared in terms of general, vocational and civic education. In this model participation is reduced to a limited range of practices and connected to a formally institutionalised status of citizenship, a set of rights and responsibilities to which young people need to be adapted. Participation as a *principle* in

contrast starts from the assumption that every individual has the right to be involved regardless of his or her status and abilities – for normative reasons as well as for reasons of social integration in individualised and democratic societies. In this case participation is seen as an integral principle of citizenship as practice or ‘lived citizenship’ (Lister 2003) which is connected to the subjective identities and biographies of the individuals (Isin & Wood). Otherwise a link between individual and collective identification which is a prerequisite of any participation is unlikely to emerge. This implies that participation and citizenship can not be taught (and practiced later) but experienced by doing (Dewey 1916; Wenger 1998).

While previous analysis of participation has often centred around the question how much young people are allowed to participate (e.g. Hart’s ladder of participation reaching from ‘manipulation’ to ‘self-initiated and self-directed participation’, Hart 1992) our perspective extends to the question if and to what extent participatory programmes are open and flexible towards subjective needs and interests and the different resources and opportunities according to gender, ethnic origin or life style (Stevens et al., 1999, p. 2-3).

In addition, this implies to differentiate the implicit understanding of participation: In most participatory programmes, participation relates to the decision-making within given institutional settings – whether activities in youth work or official policy making at local level – or within initiatives of community development, i.e. issues which are primarily defined as collective. However, as we have argued, the collective needs to be constantly redefined with regard to individual perspectives. Taking the phrase “decisions which concern them” (European Commission 2001, p. 8) serious, requires to interpret participation also in terms of *biographical self-determination* so that individuals perceive participation as a means to develop their own lives in interaction and negotiation with their co-citizens.

Possibilities and experiences of participation in young people’s lives

In the introduction we have referred to the apparent decline of young people’s political participation, at least in terms of formal and institutionalised forms of involvement. We have argued that in most cases young people can no longer find any subjective and biographical relevance in these forms of participation. In the following, we want to present some selected findings from the projects UP2YOUTH and YOYO. We will change the perspective by asking for the scopes of participation young people find in three key areas of their lives: school, transitions to work and youth culture.

School is expected to prepare young people for later life, including the status of citizenship. The relationship between learning and participation or more concretely: participation in school was therefore one issue in the UP2YOUTH project. However, as there is only little systematic empirical research on how young people experience participation in school we will restrict ourselves to some indicative reflections. A core of *civic education* in most countries consists in the provision of knowledge related to the parliamentary system, party politics or basics in economics. Cross-country comparison shows differences with regard to the amount of lessons, the level of education and whether it is a separate or integrated subject. All across Europe however, there is evidence that young people experience civic education primarily as a school subject, that is as alienated. It is part of a system which sets them under pressure of achievement and competition with regard to contents and topics which are imposed by the authority and in many cases without any subjective relevance for their lives.

This sense of alienation has been explicitly articulated in the interviews carried out in the YOYO interviews. Young people criticise the excessive standardisation of teaching, the lack of

possibilities for personalised trajectories and of developing the potential of individual resources:

“No space is given to particularities. In the end priority is given to the group, the class preference without taken into account different times of learning. All becomes very passive. At least this was my experience – being the spectator of all effects.” (Male, Italy, 23)

School seems to offer few stimuli for *intrinsic motivation*, especially for youth from weak social backgrounds, giving way to a vicious circle in which learning is inhibited by experiences of failure and to exclusion and self-exclusion from the school system (Cuconato et al. 2004; cf. Walther et al. 2006).

With regard to civic or citizenship education this is doubled by the fact that school as such is a rather non-participatory setting. The comparative analysis of *students' councils* in the EU carried out in the UP2YOUTH project, shows that only few young people are positive regarding the possibilities of students' councils and even less actively engage. Despite of differences in the legal and institutional frame work of students' councils, their competencies are limited. In most cases they are restricted to involvement in the shaping of school life (e.g. organising school parties or restructuring the school yard), in few cases (such as Austria) also aspects of school management are included. Involvement in curriculum development, disciplinary issues, questions of learning assessment and progression through educational careers are either excluded or restricted to token actions (Loncle & Muniglia 2008)).

The dominant interpretation of the relationship between learning and participation is that children and young people are not yet able and prepared to take responsibility but need to be instructed and informed with regard to the respective techniques and knowledge first.

Transitions to work is a field in which the EGRIS network has carried out own empirical studies, including the question to what extent policies addressing disadvantaged youth in their transitions to work allow for participation and – if so – to what extent this generates motivation and thereby reinforces their social integration (for the following see Walther et al. 2006).

A first finding of the YOYO project emerged already during the sampling of projects for the case studies as participatory projects are rather the exception than the rule in transitions to work. In fact, our sample consisted of a range of projects which can be classified into five categories from ‘soft’ to ‘hard’ youth policies: youth work, integration of youth at risk, pre-vocational measures, training and employment schemes. Participation is high in youth work which however has no systematic link with the labour market while training and employment schemes provide jobs or qualifications but normally do not leave any space for participation. However, there were two exceptional projects providing both ‘hard’ – qualifications and wages – and ‘soft’ resources in terms of possibilities of participation.

In interviews young people's subjective experiences with institutional representatives of the transition system were reconstructed concerning learning in school, information and orientation, job search or the work experience. With regard to information and orientation aimed at allowing for subjectively meaningful choices, the young people ascribed a great value to the case study projects compared to other institutions, especially vocational orientation provided by school:

“There was this guy from XY [careers service] who talked for hours. In the end you left without having understood anything. Then the headteacher thought it was useless, only waste of time.” (Male, Italy, 22)

However not only in the Italian context, also in countries with more standardised career services negative attitudes were witnessed, for example in the United Kingdom and Ireland where the coercive concept of *workfare* indirectly affects also vocational orientation:

“I was forced to go there. It was just a waste of time.” (Female, Ireland, 20)

In Germany where job offers are tied to education and training certificates, the situation does not appear different:

“It is an administration, after all. They are not in the mood for working. Just staring into your file, going blah, blah, treating you like a cow.” (Male, 23, Germany)

The connecting thread emerging from the interviews is young people’s request for a greater attention for them as individuals and their subjective aspirations which tend to be valued less than the demands of the labour market and the training system.

Work experiences heavily depend on the specificities of national labour markets, existing employment policies and social support measures. As regards Italy, young people experience pressure towards precarious and unprotected jobs:

“(…) a scheme which is perhaps even worse are these time work agencies, (…) because in the factory your are forced to work more than the normal workers, there’s no trade union protecting your rights. And if you argue with the company they will not continue your contract.” (Male, Italy, 24)

In the Netherlands in contrast, young people are rather positive towards flexible work as the transition system guarantees support and benefits allowing for a life in dignity while the free time can be used for experimenting new vocational directions of further training.

What where the key differences between young people’s experiences in the mainstream transition system and in the case study projects, especially those providing exceptional spaces of participation? An obvious key factor of motivation was the availability of spaces for self-experimentation, a form of biographical laboratory which was protected while at the same time allowing for self-chosen projects:

“There should be nobody telling you, ‘do this, do that’. In the first place you should decide yourself, trying out. Of course, we have made errors in this one-year project. But it was also good to be allowed to fail and learn from that, a form of self-training.” (Female, Italy, 21)

Learning organising events, contacting authorities, dealing with invoices and balance sheets, deciding how to spend resources in the assembly, organising international exchange or workshops are all activities with a triple effect: acquisition of somehow professional skills (planning, organisation, realisation), personal development in terms of confidence and consciousness, and the development of democratic and civic culture. Developing youth participation obviously requires flexible time structures which respect young people’s needs to see concrete results of their agency and which are not subject to control and evaluation regarding their efficacy and economic efficiency from the side of funding bodies.

“Of course, I have changed during the last year, I do things differently, I have grown (...): It is me who decides what to do (...). I am more conscious of time, using it for the things are useful for myself and which I like.” (Female, Italy, 15)

A key requirement for such spaces which emerged from the expert interviews with project workers in the case studies was to have more time for processes of orientation with the young people which are not only episodic but based on observation, listening and trust which evolves only if not subordinate to rigidly predefined time rhythms.

“This means to lose quite some time. There may be concepts that not everybody knows and which need to be explained in order to make sure that all are really involved.” (Female, Italy, 21)

Another factor shared by most projects is the fragile financial stability which limits the possibilities of building continuous activities beyond single projects. In some cases, even

projects recognised as ‘good practice’ did not succeed in maintaining financial stability and to be mainstreamed into local or national services.

The case studies do not reveal a single and homogeneous model of participation. However, it revealed that participation in some projects was limited to shared decision-making in few peripheral areas while in others it included also managerial issues and extended to the dimensions of community development and biographical self-determination. What can be concluded is that participation is limited to a rhetoric exercise if there is no real division of power among the actors involved including financial decision, for example through a veto right against decisions by adults or institutional representatives. The Northern Irish case of “Lifting the Limits”, a training project for single mothers, was exceptional as not only project workers but also participants were involved in meetings with the funding authorities or in conferences where the project was presented. In some way, all interviewed young people showed a considerable consciousness regarding their potential and their will to actively take biographical decisions, to find out what corresponded to their needs and to make choices.

While school and transitions to work are widely acknowledged as the fundamental and existential areas of modern youth life, this is much less the case with regard to leisure and *youth cultures*. Many youth researchers refer to increasing and diversifying voluntary social and environmental concerns of young people for example in consumption and political activities such as participating in anti-war or anti-globalisation demonstrations. It has been also referred to the increasingly virtual forms of engagement through the Internet (CIVICWEB 2007; Loncle & Muniglia 2008; Spannring et al. 2008). Although such forms of participation can not be identified only among alternative youth life styles such as squatters, they still account only for a minority of young people (cf. Eurobarometer 2007; Spannring et al. 2008). Nevertheless, the analysis of countercultures, the patterns and symbols of identification they rely on (‘friends and enemies’), the practices they apply and the related life style issues (e.g. music and fashion styles) allows to study how nowadays young people create the relationship between their subjective identities and the collective (cf. Miles 2000). They also reflect the fact that they are neither recognised as participation nor as political but often disregarded or even criminalised.

The issue of young people’s participation becomes much more ambivalent where right-wing youth are concerned – although often relating to the official political agenda and relying on collective action which at least partly is formally organised. The ambivalence extends to rioting youth, mainly from disadvantaged social and ethnic backgrounds who do not feel respected from policy makers or public authorities – including the representatives of the education system which makes them fail (e.g. recent events in French and Danish suburbs and in German schools). Although in many instances, they explicitly claim respect from society and societal institutions, riots are mostly referred to as deviant without acknowledging participatory elements; or better: reflections of denied participation (Lagrange & Oberti 2007).

Another ambivalence is connected to primarily leisure-oriented scenes such as the skaters. As in the case of graffiti, skating may be interpreted in terms of participation inasmuch as one of the core issues is (re-)gaining public space and visibility. In fact, skaters often get into conflict with the authorities which in some cases leads to politicisation such as in the case of ‘Cork Skaters’ who participated and campaigned in municipal elections. At the same time, skating is a prototype example for superficial local participation programmes which often result in building a single half-pipe outside the city centre. However, as this does not provide social visibility, many skaters only use them for training – in order to improve their performance in public space (Loncle & Muniglia 2008).

Comparative perspectives

The analysis of the impact of context factors on participation of young people on the one hand relates to socio-economic, on the other hand to institutional factors, for example through comparative analysis. Although there are hardly any systematic comparative studies on youth participation, especially not taking a biographical perspective (cf. Walther et al. 2006; Spanring et al. 2008), comparative research on youth transitions allows to outline different contexts in terms of constellations of socio-economic, institutional and cultural factors. The model of *transition regimes* has been developed on the basis of comparative welfare studies which refer to ‘regimes’ as clusters of countries which display similar norms and practices of citizenship (Esping-Andersen 1990; Jenson 2007). While welfare rights are a fundamental aspect, structures of education and training, objectives and approaches of policies for disadvantaged youth – and their recent redefinition in terms of activation – need to be added in order to achieve a full picture. Behind these institutional dimensions cultural patterns emerge such as the meaning of disadvantage in youth transitions (ascribed to individual or structural deficits) as well as representations of youth in general. Up to now comparative transition research distinguishes four ideal type regimes with regard to Western Europe (while Middle and Eastern European transformation states have not yet been classified). These regime types may be reinterpreted with regard to the extent to which young people are provided options for choice in their transitions to adulthood cf. Walther et al. 2006):

- In the *universalistic* regime type (Nordic countries) youth means personal development and is supported by individual welfare rights of young people. Throughout the inclusive and flexible education and training system young people are encouraged to make choices; this includes labour market programmes for disadvantaged in which ‘activation’ relies on positive incentives and a wide understanding of ‘being active’.
- In the *liberal* regime type (Anglosaxon countries) youth is expected to reach economic independence as soon as possible. Inasmuch as individuals are seen as market actors, options for choice do exist but also the expectation to take responsibility for risks of failure and exclusion; activation relies on sanctions and a narrow understanding of activity in terms of work also if precarious.
- In the *employment-centred* regime type (continental countries) youth is defined as qualification for and allocation to occupational positions through a combination of standardised but selective education and training. Consequently options for choice are unequally distributed among insiders and outsiders; in transitions to work disadvantaged youth have to accept compensatory education programmes aimed at the cooling-out of their aspirations which is the dominant interpretation of activation.
- The *sub-protective* regime type (Mediterranean countries) is characterised by a structural deficit where options for choice depend almost exclusively from family resources and family cultures. Disadvantaged youth find themselves pushed to accept informal and precarious work while state programmes contribute to the precarisation of youth transitions.

Conclusions

The findings presented above question dominant definitions of participation and their restriction to institutionalised forms of collective action for which young people need to be prepared in terms of information, skills or knowledge. If we summarise, the UP2YOUTH and the YOYO analysis, we suggest to refer to all actions of young people as potentially participatory which are

- carried out in and/or addressing the public (both public space and public institutions);
- resulting from individual decision-making processes(not only completely conscious ones).

In an *analytical perspective* this implies to extend the notion of participation also to activities which are apparently merely hedonistic and that in cases of social disadvantage and suppression may take forms which are stigmatised as deviant or criminal. The under-representation of disadvantaged youth in formally acknowledged participation programmes may be interpreted in the sense that the more options of choice young people have, the higher their engagement within formally acknowledged and/or institutional ways – be it with regard to their own biographies, be it with regard to their communities. Of course, such hypothesis requires empirical analysis.

On a *policy level* a broad understanding of participation implies to refer to young people as co-citizens rather than postponing citizenship rights to uncertain future and to include all choices and decisions regarding the individual biography in the framework of public institutions. Our analysis suggests that participation contributes to social integration if it is a central principle of Integrated Transition Policies which coordinate different policy sectors in a flexible way starting from young people's biographical choices (Walther et al. 2006; Loncle & Muniglia 2008).

However, presenting participation as a principle of policy making and governance is ambiguous and deserves some critical reflection. Parallel to the extensive reference to participation, political discourses refer to individual agency also in the context of tying welfare rights to obligations under the notion of activation. In fact, activation in many cases stands for replacing welfare by self-responsibility rather than assuring individual autonomy.

According to Stevens et al. (1999) participation therefore necessarily implies *conflict* and mechanisms which do not suppress but give space for acting out and mediating conflict:

“In promoting participation organisations give up some of their power in order to gain a certain degree of mobilisation in their favour (...) which helps them to achieve their goals. This process is dialectical in that it will involve conflict. ” (Stevens et al., 1999, p. 7).

In the traditional model, policies of integration were designed on the basis experts identifying the needs of target groups determined according to bureaucratic principles. Nancy Fraser argues that social justice nowadays requires welfare institutions which do not limitate themselves to involve individuals in terms of consultation but also in terms of needs interpretation – participatory parity (Fraser & Honneth 2003).

If participation increases with available choices as argued above, welfare and participation need to be seen as interdependent. While welfare in its traditional sense of redistribution can turn into alienating normalisation, participation without welfare carries the risk of individualised precariousness and exclusion. Active citizenship can contribute to social integration only if individuals are enabled to relate their subjective identities and biographies to the wider collective as partly achieved in the *universalistic* transition and welfare regime with its inbuilt options for choice in various policy sectors such as school, training, vocational orientation and work, not only in youth work and leisure time. While leisure time appears to be the area in which young people have most options for choice it needs to be questioned to what extent this is limited to consumer choices if activities through which young people claim public space and visibility tend to be neglected and disregarded.

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