



## Editorial

### **Youth Public and Political: Young People as (Ir)Relevant Actors in the Realm of Citizenship<sup>1</sup>**

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Young people today are often described as politically passive, as detached from public and political engagement, and as locked within the dematerialized and escapist online environments. Similarly often, they are depicted and researched as active political and public actors, as a new hope, or as a challenge to mainstream politics, dominant values, and democratic institutions and processes. However, both pictures obviously could be simplistic and misleading if not put into a broader context and without taking into account the actual variability of youths' political and public practices. As in any previous cohorts, we can expect to find a publicly and politically explicitly active segment in the current younger population next to various alternative approaches to the public sphere. These approaches might range from latent political activity, which is often invisible from traditional research perspectives, through political disinterest, to the active rejection of politics as such.

When trying to grasp the civic and political engagement of contemporary youth, it is particularly essential to consider the altered social context in which young people engage, as compared to their parents' and grandparents' generations. Although nation states and related institutions still retain their roles as an important context for political participation, an increasing number of decisions affecting young people's everyday lives take place in supranational political entities (the European Union being one of the most noticeable examples) or global companies that are typically unapproachable by traditional means of political control. At the same time, repertoires of political action have been considerably broadened by the emergence of online activism that, among a large number of other impacts, facilitates community-level and transnational associating and communicating between people. These developments go hand in hand not only with the need to invent new effective forms of activism, but also with the transformation of collective identities (generational, class, subcultural, local, national, or supranational) that serve as a basis for youths' collective action. In recent years, we could also observe tendencies towards the polarization and radicalization of the public and political spheres. Such events as Brexit, or the formation of new political movements in Southern Europe, show that young people tend to be highly

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responsive to these processes. Finally yet importantly, some general developmental aspects associated with the transition from adolescence to adulthood have changed in the last decades. Due to a number of societal factors, young people, more than previous generations, tend to postpone making their vocational, relational, and value commitments, and perceive the early years of their adulthood as a period of instability and ongoing exploration.

These changes are not only shaping the range of opportunities for youth engagement, available practices, and the relevance of issues targeted by political activity, but they also affect intimate personal experiences inevitably linked to political activism. Therefore, there is a pressing need for both theoretical and methodological innovations in order to address youth activism adequately. The full – empirically and theoretically rich – picture of contemporary youth as political and public actors is still missing, and the existing knowledge tends to be severely incomplete and fragmented by different research traditions and disciplines. Although it is beyond the capacity of this special issue to provide such an integrative and exhaustive picture of youth engagement, we believe that the following collection of articles does help to fill some gaps in our present knowledge of youth political engagement and offers intriguing methodological and theoretical hints for further research in this area.

We managed to collect a unique combination of six articles, employing diverse methodological and theoretical perspectives. The scope of approaches includes a cross-national comparative survey, a quasi-experiment based on pre- and post-intervention comparisons, a mixed-design study, a study analyzing public policies, an ethnographic research and a “manifesto” offering new theoretical insights into the field.

The article by *Mai Beilmann et al.* employs a large amount of quantitative survey-based data from Estonian and Czech adolescents and young adults to establish a typology of their civic and political participation. Using advanced statistical methods, the authors have found four clearly distinguishable basic types of participation in both Eastern European countries. Besides a small group of generally active youth and a larger group of generally passive youth, there were two intermediate groups of moderately active young people. The specific profiles of the two intermediate groups, however, differed between Estonia and the Czech Republic. Moreover, further analysis has shown that a group of generally active young people in Estonia cannot be considered the same as the active group in the Czech Republic, as they comprise people with substantively different socio-demographic profiles and dissimilar political attitudes.

*Anne Valkering et al.* focus on the issue of so-called debate programmes for high school students. These programmes are often perceived as means for improving students’ democratic attitudes and participation, even though there is still only limited empirical evidence on their effectiveness. Using data from seven Eastern European countries, the authors analyze how political competences (e.g. interest or knowledge), democratic values (e.g. tolerance), and expected participation changed in high school students who participated in the debate programme, compared to the control group, over one school year. The results are relatively sobering, showing that participating in the debate programme has no considerable effects on the outcome variables. Instead, it seems that there are initial differences between students who do and do not join the debate programme (the former group being more competent, pro-democratic, and active), and these differences tend to remain stable over time.

The article by *Christina Ortner* brings a European dimension into this special issue. Using a combination of qualitative and quantitative data, the paper explores how and why young Austrians engage with media coverage on the European Union. The results suggest three possible approaches among young people: one group pays attention to media coverage of the EU and searches for related information; another group does not actively follow EU-related media content but reacts with negative emotions when they encounter it; the last group is generally disinterested in European affairs. The author concludes that the mainstream media in Austria might be able to reach young adults with EU-related news, but they are only partly successful in explaining the relevance of EU-level politics and engaging youth in public debates. Engaged young people are mainly supporters of the EU who feel well represented, while the opponents of the EU feel excluded from politics and perceive themselves as irrelevant.

*Davide Mazzoni et al.* aim to describe and classify the underlying representations of youth in youth policy documents in Italy. Their analysis of documents published from 2012 to 2016 at the national, regional, and local levels identifies four possible representations of young people as talents, a resource, problems, or a vulnerable population. The authors further illustrate that the underlying representations of youth often imply specific policy measures. While the representation as talents implies an orientation towards skills development, the resource representation implies policies oriented towards promoting young people's protagonist roles in their communities. However, if young people are represented as vulnerable or as problems, the proposed measures typically involve taking care of them and protecting the society from them.

*Shakuntala Banaji et al.* argue in their study that the current research on youth engagement tends to neglect the approaches and methodologies that would provide young people with an opportunity to describe and express their perceptions, opinions, and behaviours freely and in natural settings where their public activism actually takes place. As a solution to this gap, the authors propose that researchers should employ the advantages of critical and reflexive ethnography alongside more traditional research methods. To illustrate their point, the authors offer practical examples of their own ethnographical research focused on two cases of youth activism in the United Kingdom. Hence, they show how new insights can be gained by a combination of interviewing, observation, and document analysis during a long period of sustained contact.

And last but not least, the paper authored by *Klára Šimůnková* comes with quite an untypical and, at the same time, intriguing form of scholarly narrative: her text drawing on critical theory and urban sociology is conceived as a theoretical manifesto proposing a conceptual and, at the same time, political solution for youths' search for their role in contemporary urban public spaces. Employing a rich style profoundly contrasting with usually sober academic genres, Šimůnková introduces the concept of hybrid ludic engagement. According to the author, hybrid urban spaces augmented with data layers and condensed with ultimate time-space compression are open to new forms of public and political agencies based on playfulness and enable young people to approach the city as a playground.