

Book Review: Youth Participation in Europe: Beyond Discourses, Practices and Realities

by Blog Admin

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*In a period where social unrest manifests itself by coinciding with young people's dissatisfaction with formal political involvement and the diversification of protest movements across the globe, the question of youth participation is at the forefront of democratic societies. Based on original research data, **Youth Participation in Europe** provides a thorough analysis of participation initiatives at the implementation level and gives a transversal approach to various areas of youth participation. **Alex Hensby** finds that the voice of youth presented here is saying 'why should we speak if no-one is listening?'*



Youth Participation in Europe: Beyond Discourses, Practices and Realities. Edited by Patricia Loncle, Morena Cuconato, Virginie Muniglia and Andreas Walther. The Policy Press.

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'Timeliness' is a fast becoming an overused term to describe new academic books. Given that no social science publication would presumably wish to *not* be seen as timely in some way, academic publishers are increasingly prone to attach this tag to almost any new release, leaving them to vie in competition with all other 'timely' titles. By its very nature, academic publishing is never going to be quickest out of the blocks when it comes to responding to current events, especially when it comes to original research – after all, gathering data and writing up results takes time, and the long and inexorable process of peer-reviews and proof-reads can rather cruelly put deflate whatever claims a book once had to being genuinely 'timely'.



This edited collection of research essays on contemporary youth participation is arguably a case in point: the book's back cover declares that the current 'diversification of protest movements across the globe' has meant that 'the question of youth participation is at the forefront of democratic societies'. This is a fair observation, but in truth the book contains little of the recent youth-led protest movements that one might have expected to find: whilst there are case-studies responding to the 2011 Arab Spring, analyses of Spain's indignados and 15M movement, anti-austerity protests in Greece, the UK student protests – even the English riots – are almost entirely absent. What *can* be found in *Youth Participation in Europe*, however, is the essentially convincing argument that scholars and policymakers need to re-think longstanding definitions of youth participation. This point is made most explicitly in Andreas Walther's concluding chapter when he argues that breaking from traditional, self-reproducing participation/non-participation ultimately requires an approach where one should ultimately view 'all actions of young people in or directed to the public as potentially participatory' (2012: 240; emphasis added).

As might seem clear, this is the sort of book that raises more questions than it answers, but as a collection it benefits from a clear and methodical structure which offers useful snapshot of different forms of youth participation at schools, online forums and social media websites, and national and local youth policy initiatives. This desire to re-think youth participation is triggered principally by the European Commission's 2001 White Paper on youth participation (proof alone that this is no new issue), spawning the UP2YOUTH research project from which much of the authors' original data in this book is drawn. The White Paper's

central claim was that 'youth' should be seen more as a resource and less as a problem, and as the chapters covering existing youth policy clearly demonstrate, this is no easy task. As an issue in its own right, 'youth' has usually suffered from being divided across different governmental departments and layers of governance, thus providing few opportunities to build a unified or consistent campaign. Cuconato issues a word of caution when it comes to taking holistic approaches to youth policy in her study of Italy, as they risk flattening important class and regional variations. Moreover, Gaitain's chapter on youth participation in Spain observes that policy initiatives all too often function as 'decorative objects to display good intentions' rather than providing clear and consistent bridges to adult participation. Ultimately, she finds that young people have views and they want to share them, but not in a context that seems tokenistic and disconnected from where the real decisions are made.

The need to avoid homogeneous youth policy also reflects the wider impact of individualization, a key underlying concept in this book. As made clear by Spanring, individualization is better understood as a process that *transforms* political engagement rather than one responsible for its interminable decline. Nevertheless, this transformation has produced a pluralisation of contested and competing participatory epistemologies, each holding different expectations of what the 'participatory ideal' can and should be. Like Gaitain, Spanring concludes that young people seek to play a more participatory role when it comes to meaningful decision-making in formal politics, although it is presently unclear what such a platform might look like in practice.

For many scholars and commentators, the answer to this dilemma is probably found in the multi-participatory and interconnected world of Web 2.0. ICT network participation has become a somewhat crowded field of analysis in recent times, with debates seemingly stuck in an ever-polarising gridlock between authors who issue excitable treatises in web-evangelism, seemingly to goad unabashed web-sceptics into issuing predictably pithy and Pooterish dismissals. To some relief, the authors here prefer to focus on practice rather than polemic. Cuconato and Waechter carefully identify the uses of social media as an organising tool, a media source, and tentatively, a public sphere. The web's capacity to function as a platform for participation in its own right, however, draws more scepticism: for all the talk of the Arab Spring representing a 'Facebook revolution', Tahir Square remained very much a physical space, and but for the very physical conflicts which took place there, there would have been very little to mediate. Similarly, Banaji and Buckingham conclude that online participation is better understood as something which enhances rather than replaces offline participation. As a space in its own right, the internet is ideal for developing information-hungry 'monitorial citizens', but fostering youth civic *participation* requires building genuine opportunities for reciprocal engagement with those in power – ultimately, the voice of youth presented here is saying 'why should we speak if no-one is listening?'

In sum, this book brings together a number of important debates about youth participation in sociology, social policy and political science. Whilst it might lack 'timeliness' in the choice of its case studies, *Youth Participation in Europe* nevertheless poses important questions about the nature of youth participation today and in the future: in an age of individualization and increasingly contested democratic processes, how might we open up the public sphere in ways that gives the voice of youth the traction it deserves? The answer may not ultimately be found in this book, but researchers and policymakers would do well to heed its call.

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