

Active citizens working for democracy?

(A view from the construction of youth citizenship and political participation)

Social participation and the exercise of citizenship constitute key dimensions in the inclusion of young people in society, since through them young people express our potential as well as our desires in the construction of a shared future. On this subject, the new generations confront a problematic situation, as much vis-a-vis the Institutional as the subjective (which is very far from the utopic impulses of previous generations). The spaces and motives for the interaction of young people with the public and political have changed radically. The place for young people in politics and the disillusionment with democracy as a political regime has changed substantially in the last few decades. We have stopped associating politics and democratic ideals with the idea of great social change – currently the participation of young people tends to be found in local spaces and away from political parties, assuming small scale structures, of shorter duration and with a more modest goal in terms of ambitions for change. The question of youth today is developing in a context of cultural change, at the level of values, which influences its political initiatives, lending a generational significance to its vision of democracy, and in accordance with its own experience of living in a context marked by a prolonged economic, political and social crisis.

In general, it seems that young people discredit the Political Institutions and the redefinition of the idea of the democratic system. This seems to be linked to the idea that the political system, the electoral system and the parties don't represent our demands, nor do they show dedication to the promotion of greater equality. Young people value democracy as a space to design our own projects, but we don't see formal democracy as a sufficient condition.

The most obvious form of rejection is manifested through a lack of participation in elections and the rejection of the vote as an instrument for citizen participation.

Surveys (such as the 2005 National Youth Survey, undertaken by the Mexican Institute for Youth), show in general that young people participate little in student movements, syndicates, political parties and community organisations - areas where the participation of young people in previous generations was largely concentrated. In spite of there persisting a strong connection between association and politics in the collective imagination of young people, participation in Political Institutions is least attractive. In fact the majority don't identify with any party and of the minority who have politico-ideological preferences, the proportion of activists is minimal.

Though young people manifest discredit towards the traditional political organisations, we highly value participation as a mechanism for self realisation and reaching of goals. What we reject, rather, is the type of political practice and the way in which it makes us feel manipulated by others, for ends with which we do not identify.

We can affirm that, just as the key word in public policy for children is protection, and for those linked to women, equality, in the public policies for youth the key word is participation.

Currently young people tend to be more sporadic and inconsistent in participation: we involve ourselves generally in specific activities, during certain periods, without committing ourselves in the long term.

However, since the Study on Youth Citizenship, young people are perceived as “duly authorised persons” where the fundamental problematic is recognised by the State and by society, through their active participation in the formulation of youth policies. Young people are considered agents of social change, attending to its aesthetic dimension, youth policies are articulated along with public policy and youth initiative is stimulated in its various forms.

We need to understand that politics is something more than participation in political parties, the act of voting, or the sacramental nature of an election. Politics refers to participation in a public space, it is the process through which we construct the common good (the common interest).

In this sense, we can affirm that political participation can be defined as “each citizen activity designed to intervene in the designation of its governors or to influence in the formation of state policies. It includes collective or individual actions, legal or illegal actions, activities of support or pressure, through which one or various persons try to influence the decisions surrounding the type of government which should rule a society, the way in which the State is run in said country, or specific government decisions which affect a community or its individual members”.

Thus, we can talk of a lack of understanding between the political sphere and young people.

The evidence warns that there is a marked gap between young people and the main public institutions (political parties, congress, the judicial system and the police). There is also the controversial issue of the real or supposed apathy of young people, in particular our political participation.

Everything seems to signal that this situation is related to the disenchantment produced by institutions which function more and more bureaucratically, perceiving themselves to be inert or routine institutions, which contrasts with the predominant desire of young people, who want to be witnesses and participants in short term and background changes.

Whenever we talk about youth, we think of the future, perhaps because it reminds us of those first years of this stage of our lives where we still imagine the years to come; that day which is already over. We know by the same token that time doesn't go back, that its impact is forever in our lives and that the actions we undertake at this stage of our lives will influence not only our personal environment, but that by acting as generational links of social change we will impact broadly on the great changes which our entire society experiences at a global level.

However, it is necessary to abandon the paternalistic gaze through which young people are seen and promote a perspective of citizenship, and individuals as protagonists not just of a personal history but also a collective history, to value and stimulate their participation as citizens and in political issues. To concretise a policy defined by the promotion and realisation of rights and not by the view of young people as problematic.

Young people have a great deal of energy which can be transformed into a powerful force of change: we aspire to jobs, educational activities, spaces for participation, the security of a better future.

As active citizens who work for democracy, it is our duty to keep watch intensely in order to reach that better horizon we hope for.

Public policy should be a great equaliser of opportunities. It should offer effective options for the millions of young people our countries will hold (36 million by 2012 in Mexico alone, the highest figure historically for our country). Young people don't want democracy to be divorced from the search for freedom, inclusion, justice and equality.

From my experience working with youth for the strengthening of democracy in my country (Mexico), when we consulted young people on their interest in participating in such organisations, the answer was extremely positive, which shows that they reject the practices with which such organisations work, and not their ends or concrete objectives. This is very relevant: young people want to participate (and we do so when the calls to participate are transparent and shared but we don't want to feel manipulated. And maybe it will be here that we find an indication of why we should encourage young people to be full time active citizens who work for democracy in their own country. In my experience as a young person who participates actively through organised civil society working for democracy and involving other young people in this praiseworthy and important work, I can say that since 1996, when I began to be involved in youth electoral observation of local and federal processes, to develop and implement different initiatives regarding the participation of young people in politics, (meaning in a broader and richer sense than just in the electoral field), civic education, citizen participation and the strengthening of the culture of democracy seen from the perspective of the youth sector (principally because of the question of generational identity), I can affirm that although the work is permanent and the commitment undeniable, the strengthening of democracy requires more than an individual commitment and one which influences our peers. We should fight for the establishment of participative democracy around the world, where the exercise of democracy is much more than a simple form of government, and that it becomes a way of life, appropriated for active and participative citizens who sustain the principles of coresponsibility, transparency, plurality, legality, honesty and dialogue. In this sense, the integration of young people is necessarily relevant in the development and implementation of a strategy - emerging from, with and for the youth - which promotes the greatest participation of this group; not just seen from the perspective of the electorate on the day of voting, a quantitative and numeric situation which is by itself worth considering, but re-evaluating the fundamental role that young people play in the current political climate in order to:

- act as generational links between adults and a generation of children which adopts the models and stereotypes provided by young people
- the characteristic capacity for mobility of the group, which allows us to establish codes of communication between partners in the midst of the social groups amongst which we develop (youth organisations, school, clubs, community, etc.)
- depend, with greater access, on communication and skills in the area of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), which favours the automatic gathering of information, etc.

By involving ourselves in citizen participation initiatives, we will be acting as truly active citizens contributing to the strengthening of participative democracy in each of our communities or in the corners of the world where we find ourselves. We will all be winners: not just those who have great opportunities to participate in gatherings such as the 5th Assembly of the World Movement for

Democracy; the institutions will also be winners through the promotion of confidence and credibility in the actions of young people; those working with NGOs will be winners through the generation of citizenship and the development of young people's interest in approximating social questions, but most importantly, together we will contribute to the Global Society winning by strengthening citizen participation and by the positioning of young people as strategic actors in the strengthening of democracy in our world.

Investing in young people isn't just necessary to guarantee change in the work force and to increase the potential for production in national economies. More than that, it is vital for the advancement towards societies which are more inclusive in terms of well-being and citizen participation, and in the productive use of knowledge.

Acting for and with young people is key if we want to project more inclusive societies in the future. The inclusion of young people is key to ensuring sustainability for the culture of democracy in our countries. The different forms of socio-economic and political exclusion threaten future governability and here, young people can be as much victims as they can be disruptive in terms of social and democratic coexistence.

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