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#3

SHRINKING SPACES FOR YOUTH WORK!? – CHALLENGES FOR POST-DEMOCRATIC SOCIETIES

READER

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INDEX

p. 3 Siri Hummel
"THE CONTESTED SPACE FOR CIVIL SOCIETY: SHRINKING? GROWING? CHANGING?"

p. 8 Tomaž Deželan
"SHRINKING CIVIC SPACES FOR YOUTH"

p. 10 Daisy Kidd
"WHAT THE FUTURE WANTS - A CRITICAL LOOK AT DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES DESIGNED FOR YOUNG PEOPLE"

p. 13 Rareş Augustin Crăiuţ
"USING NARRATIVES AS DATA TO INVESTIGATE SHRINKING YOUTH WORK PRACTICES AND SPACES"

p. 17 Niccolò Milanese
"WHAT DOES 'POLITICS' MEAN FOR YOUTH AND YOUTH WORK?"

p. 21 Sérgio Xavier
"UNLEARNING EUROPEAN YOUTH WORK AND DISENGAGING THE XXI CENTURY LIBERAL DEMOCRACY DYSTOPIA"

p. 30 Maurizio Merico & Daniele Morciano
"AN EMPTY BOTTLE? YOUTH WORK IN ITALY, BETWEEN OLD CHALLENGES AND NEW SPACES"

p. 31 Laurent Besse & Jérôme Camus
"WHICH SPACE FOR POLITICAL COMMITMENT WITHIN YOUTH WORK IN FRANCE?"

Keynote address

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"THE CONTESTED SPACE FOR CIVIL SOCIETY: SHRINKING? GROWING? CHANGING?"

What does civil society mean?

The term 'civil society' has become generally accepted to designate the third arena beside the market and the state. The collective actors belonging to it are referred to as civil society organisations (CSO)s.

As such civil society is one of three arenas of collective action in society beyond the immediate personal sphere. This includes the individual person with his or her unmistakable singularity and dignity, plus the family into which he or she was born and grew up in, and his or her immediate environment. The three arenas in which the individual acts collectively, into which he or she may choose to enter or leave, are civil society, the market and the state. Specific tasks are performed for society as a whole in each of these arenas. Each arena has collective actors who vary greatly in size and function but also share common characteristic Civil Society. The state arena includes the nation states, regional and local communities, and transnational contractual systems as well as other institutions and organisations commissioned to carry out public regulatory tasks. Their common denominator is their participation in exercising public authority. Only the state, for example, may collect compulsory taxes while, on the other hand, forcing people to do or refrain from doing certain things as required by law. The market arena includes companies engaged in producing raw materials, products and services, ranging from multinational, global corporations to small and even minute production, skilled crafts and trading companies. Their common characteristic is their intention to achieve a profit by selling goods and services. The civil society arena includes movements, organisations and institutions that also engage in and for the general public, but for whom other characteristic civil society are of prime importance. These include, i.a.

https://www.jugendfuereuropa.de/ueber-jfe/projekte/YouthInEurope-OffenburgTalks/

- volunteerism,
- giving empathy, time, ideas and assets,
- a subjective interest in the common good,
- a primary orientation towards a predefined target, and,
- refraining fom distributing profits to members and/or owners.

There is also a discussion about who belongs to civil society, for example, by referring to religious communities, trade unions and political parties. While religious communities have long seen themselves as organisations in civil society and are increasingly being regarded as such by outsiders (Strachwitz 2019/2020), trade unions were prone to see Civil Society with scepticism until recently, even though being regarded as CSOs i.a. by the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC). Currently, a shift in opinion

appears to be taking place, with trade union leaders actually relishing being regarded as civil society actors. On the other hand, at least for Germany, it appears doubtful, whether political parties should be regarded as CSO. This is due both to their funding structure and to their immediate involvement in political decision-making processes (by selecting candidates, forming parliamentary groups, and developing positions for decision-making).

CSOs can be classified by different aspects, such as

functional (N.B.: many actors hold multiple functions)	**by their relationship with society**	**by their relationship with the other arenas**	**by their organisational structure**	**by their goals**	**by their level of organisation**
services (e.g. aid for the socially vulnerable) advocacy (e.g. for the preservation of nature) watch dogs (e.g. consumer protection) intermediaries (e.g. foundations) self-help groups (e.g. patient self-help organisations) community building (e.g. amateur musicians) political participation (e.g. protest movements) personal growth (e.g. religious communities)	loyal (e.g. supplementing / replacing state action) exit (e.g. minority associations) voice (e.g. human rights groups)	corporatist (part of an overarching system, often associated with dependencies) pluralistic (acting independently)	corporatist (part of an overarching system, often associated with dependencies) pluralistic (acting independently)	social welfare research education and training culture the preservation of nature and the environment sports human and civil rights religion	spontaneous civil society movements organisations institutions

The German civil society contains an important "corporatist" sub-sector that works closely with and is predominantly funded by the State (including contracts with the National Social Security System), providing services, and performing self-help functions. Traditionally, civil society organisations (CSOs) have played an essential role in the German welfare system, including by providing crucial health care services and disaster care. However, as part of the Government's neglect of precautionary measures against the repeated appeals from civil society and academia, funding for disaster care units has been

significantly scaled down since the 1990s. There is also an "independent" sub-sector which is funded predominantly through voluntary donations, fees for services, and foundation grants and engages in advocacy, watchdog, and deliberative democracy functions. Additionally, CSO are active as intermediaries, in community building, and as catalysts of personal growth. Like in many other country's civil society in Germany has been growing and changing over the past 30 years, recently becoming more digital, more diverse, more informal and less hierarchical. Citizens' involvement and engagement have shifted from large, established and traditional organisations to small, new movements, and from a permanent or long-term commitment to short-term activity and spontaneous unorganised engagement. Civic engagement in times of need (disaster care, refugee crisis…) has proved to be strong, while a commitment to leadership roles is diminishing. The legal, fiscal, and administrative frameworks for civil society in Germany are reasonably good. There is an ongoing debate about the political role that CSO could or should have in society. German non profit law determines non-profits as rather unpolitical and civil society organizations that regularly express themselves politically are at risk of losing their non-profit status, as happened in the case of ATTAC or Campact.[1]

In a national comparison civil society vary and seems to be stronger or weaker; its work focus may vary; its relationship to the other arenas may be cooperative or conflictual. In any case, however, civil society participates in the battle for the distribution of power in society just as the other arenas do, and thus certainly entails a political dimension. To this end, it commands fewer material resources than the others and generally no instruments of force; but it can today mobilise far more attention for and reactions to a challenge, an emergency or a shortage than the others. It forms the arena of civic engagement and volunteerism, i.e. the civic space. In regards to civic engagement there has been a tendency to shift from involvement in large, older organizations to involvement in new young movements, from a permanent or long-term commitment to a short-term commitment, from insertion into hierarchical structures to an engagement with participation in decision-making processes, from involvement in organized civil society to spontaneous unorganized engagement.

What is the discourse of the Shrinking Space of Civil Society about?

The bundled up observations of attacks and attempts to restrict civil societies all over the globe have framed in the discourse of the Shrinking Space of Civil Society (SSCS), in the affected communities, science, but also increasingly in public. The short term Shrinking Space can be understood as the political-social expression of a discourse that problematizes the attacks of various actors on civil society organizations (CSO) and has gained momentum in the last decade, as a considerable increased amount of reports and articles about this topic testifies.

Although most of the reports describing the SSCS phenomenon are country reports, the global nature of the phenomenon is usually emphasized by the authors. Vari-

1 *https://www.zivilgesellschaft-ist-gemeinnuetzig.de/attac/*

ous restrictive measures are described: The curtailment of constitutionally protected rights such as freedom of assembly and freedom of opinion through repressive police operations, as well as the public stigmatization of CSOs on the one hand and their increasing surveillance on the other. Possible restrictions on action also include the control and restriction of funding for philanthropic activities, especially of international funding and donors. Mandatory regulation that are accompanied by high accountability requirements have a restrictive effect where they are used improperly against critical organizations or are causing simply disproportionately high administrative burden. Regulatory initiatives also often result in second-order restrictions when banks that shy away from the high hurdles of accountability no longer provide loans, depositions, or other services to organizations. This 'bad image' then often leads to further discourages of donors (Hayes et al. 2017).

Nevertheless, the growth of many civil societies can be observed empirically. These assumptions appear paradoxical in the simultaneity and often lead to analytical confusion. This shows that the term shrinking space should only be used as a critical, but not as a descriptive term, and that an adequate description of the space of action of civil society requires an perception of it as a multidimensional dynamic space, which is influenced in its contingency by different socio-political developments and actors as well as the 'Zeitgeist', therefore it is better to use of the term of 'contested space'.

The space for action is determined by different actors as well as by different socio-political developments. As we can foresee being amid the Corona pandemic, it seems that the effects of Covid-19 comes like a catalysation of this contestation: On the one hand the crisis creates the peril of further anti-CSO regulations and freedom rights abuse, on the other hand social relevance of civil society became more clearer than ever. As in many other countries, in Germany, political rights and civil liberties are largely assured both in law and practice. The Covid-19 pandemic restricted rights on several grounds: Restrictions on the right of assembly made demonstrations and expressions of opinion difficult, new surveillance technologies and registration formalities posed risks for civil society actors, accelerated legislative procedures significantly limited the opportunities for civil society to participate. The financial effects of Covid-19 for civil society are not foreseeable yet. First projections indicate that waves of redundancies and insolvencies are not apparent (yet), but there are no sufficient data. But in the crisis civil society could also unlock its potential: CSOs active in health and disaster care (e.g. the German Red Cross, the Order of Malta, and others) were able to engage their volunteers and provide help and services, e.g. in mass testing, against heavy odds. Civic solidarity at the neighbourhood and local level was strong. Due to the contact restrictions, most of the initiatives were organised online. Grocery-Services for elderly or quarantined people were organised via platforms like Facebook or nebenan.de (a platform especially for neighbourhood communities, what was founded some years ago) or WhatsApp groups. Initiatives like "giving fences" with bags of necessities for people in need were created and supported in many towns, and many people started crowdfunding campaigns for small businesses or culture places in their neighbourhood areas. With Anti-corona demonstrations began to take place in July

2020 all over Germany in defiance of police regulations, with assembled a strange melange of conspiracy theorists, critiques of capitalism, and xenophobic, right-wing extremist and esoteric and alternative-medical groups, civic activists found themselves in the strange situation of witnessing their very own causes, e.g. protesting against infringements on civil liberties including freedom of assembly being voiced in public by assemblies they would wish to disassociate themselves from by all means.

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Contribution #2

Tomaž Deželan, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia

"SHRINKING CIVIC SPACES FOR YOUTH"

In both classical and contemporary political theory, civil society plays a central role in discussions over the associational life of members of a polity (i.e. a politically organised entity) […]. Civil society organisations, including youth organisations, perform a number of functions that are necessary in promoting and safeguarding basic human rights and democracy. In fact, an open civil society is one of the most important safeguards against tyranny, oppression, and other anti-democratic tendencies.

As a sphere of free and non-coercive association, an open civic space enables civil society actors to pursue a number of roles. Civil society organisations provide a platform for dialogue between a diversity of voices and the free exchange of information between civil society actors and various other stakeholders. At the same time, civil society organisations also amplify the voices of minority and other at-risk groups by raising the visibility of the key issues (and related problems) they face. Youth civil society organisations that engage young people in civic life are particularly important, as these organisations target youth-specific issues, place issues on the policy and political agenda, and identify innovative solutions in the field. In fact, as 'laboratories of democracy', youth civil society organisations have been an important catalyst for many social innovations.

Open and safe civic spaces serve as unique safe havens for young individuals from diverse backgrounds to participate and build the competence they need to fully participate in various realms of public life. These places also facilitate links to decision-makers and other stakeholders.

Nevertheless, despite the centrality of youth organisations in promoting and safeguarding basic human rights and democracy for young people, or particularly because of that, the last few years have witnessed a persistent silencing of these voices – thus narrowing the civic space available to youth. The 'global authoritarian push-back against democracy and human rights', comprising anti-democratic[1] tendencies including hate speech, fake news, populism, conflicting diversity and other phenomena headed under the banner of 'uncivil society', contributes to the shrinking of civic space irrespective of the country's democratic tradition, prevailing social cleavages, wealth, human rights record, or geographical location. Changes in legal status, funding restrictions, disproportionate reporting requirements, bureaucratic obstacles combined with other administrative regulations, and smear campaigns that aim to undermine reputation or call into question their mission, are just some of the strategies youth and other civil society organisations are facing. As a result of increasingly hostile conditions for civil, political and social engagement across the globe, youth is prevented from being an agent of social change.

1 *Based on the European Youth Forum's study Deželan, T., Sardoč, M. and Laker, J. (2020) Safeguarding civic space for young people. Brussels: European Youth Forum.*

Our research reveals that, in their quest to facilitate the above mentioned process – i.e. of youth becoming an agent of social change – youth organisations have to overcome significant challenges. These challenges, primarily imposed by governments, and the strategies to overcome them, can be broadly grouped into four categories:

Firstly, those that relate to freedom of information and expression. One in three youth organisations experience difficulties in accessing information from government; two in five have difficulties expressing themselves because of fear of retribution from the government; and one in ten is not even able to freely use the internet.

Secondly, challenges in exercising their rights of assembly and association: one in eight youth organisations experienced difficulties in organising or participating in public assemblies; and two in five of them do not feel certain that their organisation of, or participation in, such assemblies will not result in some form of retribution. Furthermore, one in five experienced governmental interference in the functioning of their organisation, while two in five youth organisations do not feel completely free from government interference. One in four also reports undue restrictions, while one third experience barriers to acquiring foreign funding. They also believe the presence of market indicators to evaluate their work is disturbing; one in four to a noticeable degree.

Thirdly, in their quest to secure and facilitate citizen participation, one fourth of organisations are not fully capable of engaging in advocacy activities due to their fear of retribution, and experience at least some difficulties in participating in the processes of deliberation and decision-making. What is more, two out of five organisations believe they are only moderately or to no extent able to influence the outcome of deliberation processes: to be precise, three out of four organisations are never, or very rarely, invited to participate in the formulation of solutions at local level, and three out of six at the national level.

A Fourth category relates to human rights and the rule of law: one third of youth organisations believe that human rights and the principles of rule of law are only moderately respected when it comes to youth. This is also shown by the fact that more than two out of five believe that youth is only moderately free from political pressures.

All in all, our study clearly demonstrates that there are serious obstacles to civic space when it comes to young people. This is also shown by the fact that one fifth of youth organisations believe that young people have limited access to civic space, and more than half of them perceive young people as underrepresented in a civic space.

The mission of redressing the trend of a shrinking civic space for young people and their organisations should focus on detecting, and the prevention of, anti-democratic legal and policy manoeuvres by government and other actors. However, to the extent that the definitions, aspirations, and acceptable expressions of democratic activity are determined through cultural and social processes, it has been—and remains—possible to pre-emptively shrink civic spaces by undermining its initial formation within each successive generation of people. To safeguard and expand the democratic project and its constituent civic spaces, it is essential to define shrinking space more broadly to also include early learning of democratic principles, such as in school curricula, and the impact of efforts to change

the terms of reference upon which they are established and reproduced.

A credible agenda for safeguarding civic spaces for youth must also include analytical lenses and data that bring the stratification of access and agency across identities, cultures, and communities to the surface; and the strategies for reclaiming the civic space should thus be customised to the particular circumstances and needs of those affected.

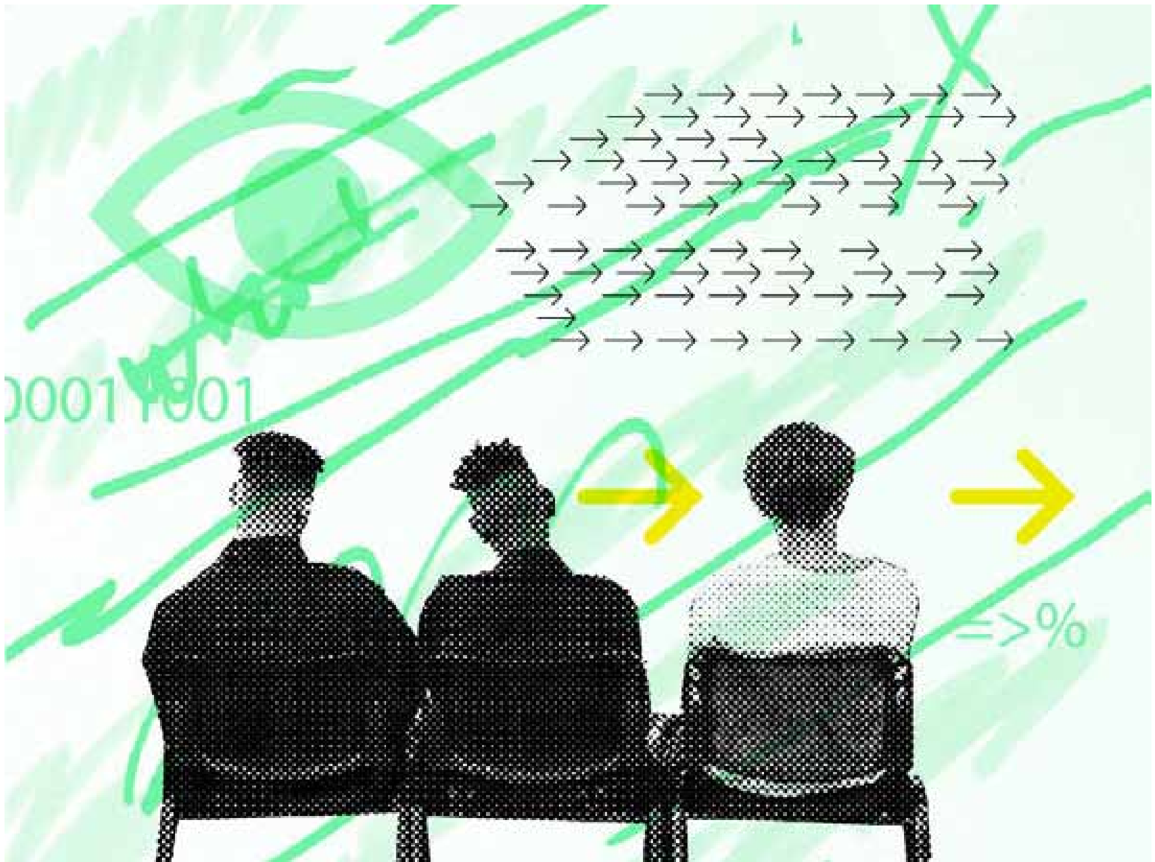
While policy discourse prioritises the identification of pragmatic and technical intervention strategies, the ways in which policy questions are framed—including the semantics, underlying assumptions, and context—all shape what answers are found and what recommendations are made. If we are to protect and even expand civic spaces in which youth can develop and express their civic and citizenship identities meaningfully and productively, then the conceptual and theoretical lenses that guide the analysis and policy craft must be embedded with considerations of youth's particular psychosocial, physical, economic, cultural, and educational needs. Efforts to effectively determine and respond to the challenges, opportunities, needs, and wishes of any demographic group requires overt attention to the identities and cultures prevalent within that group.

In addition to discussions about the importance of disaggregating youth groups, the classification of their civic engagement activities can also be useful in terms of identifying areas of strength or limiting factors within a broader strategic effort to increase targeted engagement opportunities for youth. In order to evaluate the support within such environments, a matrix or analytical framework for conducting an inventory is a useful tool.

Contribution #3

Daisy Kidd, Project Coordinator at Tactical Tech, Berlin, Germany

“WHAT THE FUTURE WANTS - A CRITICAL LOOK AT DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES DESIGNED FOR YOUNG PEOPLE”



The destruction of the natural environment has sparked anger and frustration among young people, who have taken to the streets to demand change, and yet threats to their digital environment are less widely discussed. Young people around the world are disillusioned that their futures are being drastically impacted by the actions and decisions of older generations, who they feel have not done enough to act responsibly and sustainably. The threats to our natural environment run parallel to the systemic challenges and threats to democracy that come from digital technologies; they demand the same attention from younger generations. Young people care about the digital environment they inhabit and will inherit and we need to listen to them and involve them in the conversation about their digital future.

This talk will explore how digital technologies designed for young people are often addictive, unhealthy or unsafe, looking into the potential harmful impacts this has on their autonomy and youth. Tactical Tech is an international NGO based in Berlin who have been working on topics of technology, rights and education for almost 20 years.

Their upcoming youth an technology project will look into the following questions:

- What needs to be done to the current digital environment to make it appropriate, equitable and fair for young people?
- What does it mean for young people to grow up in a 'post-truth' age? How do algorithms impact what they see? And how do augmented reality and the spilling over of digital surveillance into real life impact their actions and their autonomy?
- What does the new vocabulary for digital rights look like from a young person's perspective?
- What do we need to do to build digital (data) literacy and citizenship into the educational curriculum?
- What are the values and norms that they should expect from the digital environment?
- What would a positive digital future environment look like? And how can we ensure that this happens in a sustainable and proactive way, with young people at the centre of it?

Resources and reading from Tactical Tech:

Predictive Futures: the Normalisation of Monitoring and Surveillance in Education

What the Future Wants

Data Detox x Youth – an interactive workbook for high school students to take back control of their tech. https://www.datadetoxkit.org/en/families/datadetox-x-youth (in German https:// www.datadetoxkit.org/de/families/datadetox-x-youth)

Shrinking Civil Space: A Digital Perspective https://ourdataourselves.tacticaltech.org/posts/shrinking-civil-space-a-digital-perspective/

Contribution #4

Rareş Augustin Crăiuţ, European Confederation of Youth Clubs (ECYC)

"USING NARRATIVES AS DATA TO INVESTIGATE SHRINKING YOUTH WORK PRACTICES AND SPACES"

ECYC has developed "shifting spaces" (https://youthworkstory.com/) as a publication for collecting stories (narratives) on how shrinking space for civil society is affecting youth work and young people. The narratives, first-person illustrations of experiences in a story-like format, are provided under signature or anonymously by youth workers coming from different European Union and Partner countries, and they document how youth work as part of civil society, institutionalised or not, is shrinking. The story collection was carried out in March 2020, with the support of the European Youth Department of the Council of Europe, and our investigation continues with the building of a framework for using stories as data to be used in the early stages of policy-making.

Within ECYC, we are currently examining the *shifting space* stories to answer the question: "which spaces for youth work and youth work practices are shrinking, or are under threat, and why/how?".

The literature review on the use of stories as data for policy making, as well as the ongoing building of the pedagogical and research framework of our project, offer a space for reflection and solutions geared towards better policy making. Developing the data analysis framework has led us to thematic questions like:

- Could we have better policy if we accept that knowledge is constructed in other ways than based on individual academic expertise (the expert in-put), or comparison of country demographical data? Especially in the case of "shrinking spaces" affecting youth work and youth in general, where statistical and numerical quantifiable research is still missing (but realities are hitting hard)?
- Can young people and youth workers be accepted as experts? Even if, or when, communicating through stories?
- Could we have better evidence-based youth work policy if we engaged with stories in the early stages of the policy making cycle, and not just towards the end of a policy cycle when it's used to communicate or promote policy implementation, or to convince key stakeholders to adopt a certain policy?

The 12 stories plus a poem that you find on the project webpage, were developed during a one-week study session organised at the Youth Centre in Strasbourg. During the study session participants from 18 difference Council of Europe met and had a chance to exchange about the context of the changing civil society spaces. The participants came from different backgrounds and had different levels of engagement and interest, ranging from: interest in civil society, interest in the idea of writing a story or just being motivated by travelling and meeting other European peers.

During the training week we investigated equally two main topics: one was shrinking spaces for youth civil society and the second was story telling. For the shrinking spaces component we used a variety of tools such as the Civicus Monitor website, the report and the online compendium of the Shrinking space for civil society consultative meeting organised by the Council of Europe youth Department in 2018, Venice Commission documents or reports of the Fundamental Human Rights Agency. For the story telling part we mainly used the "heroes' journey" approach to organise thoughts and feelings. The stories were of course at the centre of interest, but they were kept as a personal effort. They were conceived, written and re-written, illustrated, evidenced, recorded through telling or in written form all throughout the week, but they were shared in the larger group only once. We exchanged about the topic of shrinking spaces for civil society all throughout the week by using formal theory and reports, online tools, a game specially conceived for this activity, exchanging with guests such as the President of the Conference of INGOs, but we did not ask anyone to share their story.

At the end of the week, we organised a telling evening. During that evening, whoever wanted to, could read, or tell in front of everyone, their story about the experience of shrinking space for youth civil society. Most of the participants did. And for the ones that did we collected anonymous feedback, that we asked participants to formulate in the form of a question or advice that could bring the story a step further in terms of clarity. Telling and reading over 30 stories took more than 4 hours, during which we were all very curious, engaged, supportive, and respectful. It was also a tensed exercise, because the topic and the situations portrayed were not light, and after a week of activities and making friends, each story had its own weigh as people sympathised each other. They were not anonymous accounts.

Self-censorship was also a main issue. We have had discussions and provided support for participants who did not want to sign their stories, as well as participants who have chosen not to share at all, or who chose to share but not to make public their stories. In one case someone is working for an institution that is enacting a restrictive measure on civil society organisations, including youth organisations. The person is conflicted between telling a story, as a way of "doing something about it", but also the uncertainty of reprisal or losing their job. And this self-censorship is an issue to varying degrees in almost all the stories. In some cases, not at all; some of the stories wanted and were more than happy to be told and wanted to be heard, like in the case of a young farmer's association aggressed by vegan and vegetarian NGOs. Self-censorship is an issue for really everyone having to defend the space of civil society. And this is precisely one of the reasons why we have to keep on sharing stories: it is something akin to a form of resistance, one of the basic "ways of doing something". But also sharing stories can inspire or help others to find the strength and courage to do something about the situations they are in by speaking up.

Another specificity of telling stories about shrinking spaces for youth civil society is what the complexity of the phenomena. After a week of discussions and activities about shrinking space for civil society, around a quarter of the stories were missing the point and

were actually not about shrinking space for civil society. This remains an issue with the concept of shrinking spaces in general: sometimes because of the personal viewpoint, people may think the civil society space for young people and their organisation is shrinking, but this is not really the case. More research is needed on the topic in general and on the contexts and phenomena of different countries and regions, because it can be difficult at times to correctly identify a case of shrinking space for civil society. Example: someone is telling the story of hardship about opening and registering their NGO and from the story we understand that it is actually a case of not having properly followed the procedure, combined with a very strict bureaucratic public apparatus. This is a story about hardships related to civil society life in general. Nothing is shrinking and there are no recent changes in legislation, or the way it is implemented, to indicate that the space for civil society is shrinking. Of course, its deplorable that something as basic as opening and registering an NGO can be a tedious task, but it cannot fall under the suspicion of shrinking space. Not unless we have new evidence.

Another aspect related to the complexity of telling a story about shrinking space for civil society comes from the fact that the phenomena is not obvious, or sometimes, not immediately obvious. Very often participants described this as "being a sensation", at first. And, yes, paradoxically this sounds paranoid. But the phenomena are complex, and in some cases, it is only by the effects that we can claim the "shrinking" of civil society spaces. Certain legislative measures or procedural changes, unlike smearing campaigns, might not be identified as intentional measures reduce the spaces civil society. This complexity of the shrinking spaces is exactly why we need to keep telling stories and exchange about it.

Because complexity of the shrinking spaces for civil society can be investigated through narratives, stories make a good case for combining quantitative and qualitative data. Stories are actually the most basic form of knowledge, and some of the first that we use in making sense about our world.

In the practice of evidenced based policy, quantitative research is favoured, if not the main standard. This means research designs and use of methods where numerical data analysis is fundamental. But there are numerous limitations on using quantitative research only: *"it is also widely accepted that it is not possible to formulate, monitor and evaluate policy in fields related to youth solely on the basis of indicators. In particular, in depth qualitative research, including consultations with key stakeholders (…) and target groups are seen as fundamental complements to indicators in evidenced-based policy-making."*[1]

Also it is noticeably clear that at European level data is insufficien in the case of shrinking spaces, and often made up by incommensurate data sets, as not every country is collecting the same data, or in the same way.

Stories are also data. There are numerous research methodologies that use stories as source material. In my academic work I deal mainly with constructivist grounded theory

1 *Assessing practices for using indicators in fields related to youth. Final report for the European Commission DG Education and Culture, Ecorys, 2011*

and situational analysis. But there are many others and there is an entire literature about these research methods. For anyone interested in these research methods, a good starting point is the "Developing Qualitative Inquiry" book series, edited by Janice Morse and published by Taylor & Francis.

We should consider the use of stories as data in evidenced-based policymaking also because we need methods that engage young people. Young people are engaged and motivated in relation to policy. But we often just involve them in ways that are uninteresting and unengaging for them, and in places that they are not hanging out. The data we use in youth policy making at European level is derived from questionnaires and national statistical data sets. In this case young people are included in survey phases, mostly surveys can carry out in urban contexts. And everyone is reaching saturation with filling in surveys, not just young people. So, we need to look for data alternatives such as stories not just for the engagement of young people. A young person might not be excited about the thought of filling in a 30+ questions survey, with multiple rating scales. But young people are frequently excited about producing and sharing identity through creative methods. Youth are very motivated, and they engage in changing the world through aesthetic citizenship[2].

...

The "Shifting stories" has now reached its second edition. Due to limited resources this is "just" a publication focusing on EU Eastern Partnership countries and the types of shrinking that is experienced in the youth filed in cases from Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Ukraine, or Moldova. This second publication can be found at https://www.shrinking.space/

2 *An example about how to understand aesthetic citizenship of young people can be found in Anna Hickey-Moody's "Youth, Arts, and Education Reassembling Subjectivity through Affect"*

Contribution #5

Niccolò Milanese, European Alternatives

"WHAT DOES 'POLITICS' MEAN FOR YOUTH AND YOUTH WORK?"

This paper presents and builds on some of the results of a three year Horizon 2020 project entitled Euryka, led by the University of Geneva, that finished in January 2020, which gathered 10 partners from across Europe to investigate the conditions, processes, and mechanisms underpinning young people's political actions in times of increasing inequality. Core to the conceptual underpinning of the project is the hypothesis that youth political participation in its various forms is a coping mechanism for dealing with inequalities. The project therefore investigated the norms, values, attitudes, and behaviours underpinning such mechanisms and how these relate to power, politics, policy making, social and political participation and the organsiation of economic, social and political life.

The project involved cross national comparisons between 9 countries with different levels of inequalities and different policy regimes: the UK, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland. It involved 8 work-packages encompassing macro, meso and micro explanatory factors for youth political behaviours, and generating normative proposals based on future scenarios. The first looked at the policy frameworks for youth participation and inclusion in the countries under study and in the EU. The second studied how media represents young people, their political claims and political claims made about them. The third conducted organizational analysis into the networks and youth-led organsiations in the countries under study. The fourth investigated the norms, values, attitudes, expectations and behaviours underlying various forms of youth political behavior through a panel survey analysis. The fifth conducted experiments to show the causal relationship between norms, values and attitudes and dispositions to political behavior. The sixth conducted biographical interviews to trace the individual trajectories of young people who had become politically active. The seventh investigated youth political participation online using social media. The eighth synthesized the results of the empirical workpackages to generate future scenarios for democracy in Europe, and normative recommendations for policy makers.

The outputs of all these workprograms can be found on the project website *https://unige.ch/sciences-societe/euryka/home/* and a video documentary produced by the project can be seen here: *http://politicalyouth.eu*

It is of course impossible to summarise the rich results of this work in a short paper or presentation: rather what I will do is pick out some results which I find interesting for the question of the changing ways that young people think about, are subject to and enact politics, and how this interacts with the landscape of institutions and organisations in Europe. I will try to suggest some ideas about what this means for doing youth work with a view to stimulating discussion, and I will also occasionally try to take account of some of the ways the Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated the situation.

Selected conclusions from the research:

1. Youth suffer from combined economic and demographic inequality, putting them at a structural disadvantage in European societies

It is now well established that young people were the hardest hit demographic from the 2018 economic crisis, and have become the demographic most likely to live in poverty, and with the lowest median income of any age group. The social security systems of European countries have been designed with the protection of pensioners and children in mind, and have historically had little targeted protection for young people entering the workforce. Recent decades have seen an increased policy focus on youth, and late-on in the economic crisis starting in 2018 governments and the EU introduced new initiatives, yet the net result is still that youth are significantly worse protected than older populations from economic hardship.

Demographic ageing of European societies means that young people are outweighed by older populations, and interview research and survey research conducted as part of the project showed that young people under 35 are much less targeted by political parties soliciting views and volunteering than older populations, suggesting that the youth vote is not prioritized in electoral politics. This is perhaps unsurprising given that in many European countries it would in principle be possible to win elections without a single vote from someone under the age of 30.

Few countries have taken any initiatives to empower the youth political voice in this context and the results in terms of political attitudes are marked in the research. Survey research conducted as part of the project shows that the cohort between the ages of 25 and 34 in many countries still has scarring from the economic crisis which underlies attitudes of skepticism towards democracy (with less than 50 per cent of young people in some countries strongly supporting democracy), less optimism for the future, and more polarized or less tolerant attitudes than generations both younger and older than them. There is much evidence that the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions and recession is hitting younger generations very hard, so there is danger of these trends being repeated and exacerbated unless game-changing policy initiatives are taken urgently.

What does this mean for youth work? This perhaps suggests that youth work needs to address a broader youth public encompassing also young people as workers, and to integrate resources allowing young people to understand the macro-level causes of their situation. It also suggests youth work needs to tackle directly the question of the possibility of youth political participation, proposing policy initiatives which could reinforce this, but also being prepared with strategies if these initiatives are not taken.

2. Young people are much more spoken about in the media and public sphere than able to speak in their own voice, and are shut out of public discussion in some areas (economy, welfare, extremism, law and order)

The extensive analysis of claims made by or about youth in national media in the 9 countries between 2010-2016 as part of the study showed that young people are much

more spoken about than able to speak. 21% of claims made in the media were made by youth themselves, and over three quarters made by other actors. Only in France did young people manage to speak more often in the media about themselves than the state, thanks in part to newspapers such as Liberation which strongly enabled this voice. It is worth noticing that this study was made before the emergence of the Fridays for Future movement, which may have increased substantially youth voices in the media concerning climate change. Still, the almost total exclusion of youth voices from media discussion concerning the economy, welfare, extremism and law and order issues when they concern young people is unlikely to have shifted substantially in recent years. When young people do manage to speak in the media, they are at least 10% more likely than other actors to be raising issues around barriers to their political participation – suggesting that youth across Europe are quite aware of their structural disadvantage.

What does this mean for youth work? Support for youth media and the training and networking of youth spokespeople in the media. Building youth awareness of the importance of a diversified media landscape. Not allowing the dominance of others speaking on behalf of youth turn into a sense of illegitimacy or disempowerment amongst youth (see below point 5).

3. The organizational and institutional landscape of Europe does not yet engage in politics in the way young people tend to want to engage

The survey results and biographical analysis of young people suggest that young people are politically concerned, aware and active, and are more frequently involved in protest actions, in assemblies and other kinds of meetings, boycotts and petitions than other parts of the population. If this kind of politics is often outside of political parties and does not always prioritize voting, it is not necessarily fully in the scope of organized civil society either. The survey of over 4500 youth and youth-led civil society organisations conducted as part of the research showed that the vast majority (nearly 80%) did not describe their mission in political terms on their websites, even if for many their issue-specific action may be political.

This suggests that there is a mismatch between the way ‘politics’ is thought of in the youth civil society sector and the way politics is done by young people. This most likely reflects a larger problem with conceptualizing political action and the domain of politics in our societies, which tend to conflate politics with party-political activity.

What does this mean for youth work? The youth work sector could perhaps do well to provide tools to articulate what is political action outside of party politics, with a view to providing better support for young people wanting to engage politically and nurture political interests. On the other hand organized civil society and youth work services would be ill advised to attempt to envelop all youth political activity, which will inevitably overflow and contest attempts at containing or institutionalizing it it.

4. There is a new struggle over women’s rights amongst the youth generations

Results of the surveys of values and attitudes of representative samples of the population

in the 9 countries show very clearly that there is a polarizing situation over women's rights. Of the 9 countries surveyed, only in Spain is it true that the younger you are the less likely you are to think that abortion is unacceptable in all circumstances. In other countries, the trend goes in the opposite direction: in France it is particularly striking where 13% of 18-24 year olds and 9% of 25-34 year olds surveyed thought that abortion is always unacceptable, whilst amongst other age groups support for this position was below 4%. These tendencies, combined with the tendencies for more members of the younger generations to be part of feminist and women's rights organisations than amongst the older generations, and the patterns of interaction between men and women on social media when discussing women's rights, suggests that there is a ongoing struggle over women's rights amongst the youth. The gender unequal affects of the Covid-19 pandemic and its tendency to reinforce stereotypical gender roles gives reason to think that this struggle will have intensified

What does this mean for youth work? The youth work sector should not think that hard won rights for women are secure, nor assume that the youth would be more in favour of these rights than older generations: the contrary is more likely to be true. This requires specific attention paid to gender equality and empowerment amongst young people but also in the functioning of the youth work sector as a whole.

5. Young people feel underprepared to participate in European democratic life

Survey and biographical interview results from the research suggest strongly that the younger generations feel they do not know enough to fully participate in the democratic life of their societies, whereas older generations feel that they do have this knowledge. Furthermore, experimental results of the project suggest that practicing democracy at a younger age (for example by participating in protest actions or assemblies, by being elected to responsibilities at school etc.) reinforces democratic dispositions amongst young people that stay with them for life, even when they lose confidence in political institutions.

What does this mean for youth work? Youth work intrinsically has a dimension of citizenship education, but perhaps there is work to be done not only to ensure that young people have the knowledge and practical experience, but also that they feel the confidence and legitimacy to participate fully. The youth work sector could consider its own advocacy capacity also towards formal educational institutions, and the possibilities for working together with schools.

6. Young people are less committed to free movement than commonly assumed

A potentially surprising result of survey research conducted for the project is that younger generations seem less enthusiastic about free movement of people than older generations. In several European member states support is still high, with more than 60% of all age groups in France, Germany, Italy and Spain supportive of free movement, but in Greece support is lower amongst people under 35 years of age. In Sweden it is below 50 per cent, and in Poland below 40 per cent. In Poland there is also higher support amongst younger people than older people for limiting free movement for the sake of keeping public order.

We can suppose that in the context of the Covid-pandemic, support for free movement has lowered even further. This suggests that free movement has become further politicized, and perhaps also that many members of younger generations have experienced free movement more as forced displacement or as a highly alienating working experience, rather than an adventure.

What does this mean for youth work? Youth workers could perhaps reflect on mobility as a fact of life for many young people which is not always a positive experience and which has a political and contested dimension, and also to reflect on the connections between mobility inside of European Union and mobility into the European Union. It seems unlikely that highly prejudicial political attitudes towards the mobility of people coming into Europe do not spill over into attitudes towards mobility of people inside Europe.

7. social media is a place of inequality and political struggle

The innovative research into social media debates about climate change and women's rights conducted in the 9 countries of the project revealed social media as a place of political struggle and as a place of inequality of voice. Younger users of social media contacted through the research are under no illusions about social media, and tend to use strategically social media as a tool either for information gathering, or for mobilization and influence where the conditions are favourable.

What does this mean for youth work? If few people are now naïve about social media as a neutral space, it is not clear that strategies for acting politically through social media are widespread in the sector.

Contribution #6

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"UNLEARNING EUROPEAN YOUTH WORK AND DIS-ENGAGING THE XXI CENTURY LIBERAL DEMOCRACY DYSTOPIA"

We are called to be architects of the future, not its victims.
R. Buckminster Fuller

Dystopia

Europe is living dystopian times; nevertheless, liberal democracies thrive. The refugees' crisis lasts 10 years of political impasse; the destruction of the planet reached no-return metabolic rifts (Salleh, 2010); economic inequality keeps growing (Oxfam, 2016); education systems seem structurally crystalized *ad eternum* (Illich, 1970); public policies mainstream sophisticated forms of racism (Goldberg, 2015); quota regimes are necessary to enforce gender equality (Butler, 1990); neoliberalism and individualism are fiercely stepping over common rights (Harvey, 2005); historical colonial deeds remain celebrated and openly reproduced (Mbembe & Corcoran, 2019); the commoditization of human rights, such as education and health systems, is globally naturalized; a growing percentage of people is facing *burnout* (Eurofound, 2018); social media algorithms are influencing electoral outcomes (Lyon, 2015); populism and authoritarian leadership is leveraging on people's scepticism over democracy institutions; the Coronavirus pandemic - and the competition on accessing a possible vaccine - is re-illustrating the inability for cooperation at global level, even if the goal is preventing a massive death-toll, or human extinction. John Stuart Mill, perhaps the most influential figure in modern liberalism, defined himself *utopia* as *"something too good to be practicable"*. He also referred to *dystopia* as "*something too bad to be practicable*" (1868). What more needs the practice to do in order to be bad enough for earning the "dystopia" describer? Through which utopia did we reach this point?

Liberal Democracy

Following the American and French revolutions in the XVIII century, the *Enlightenment* ideas – such as rationalism, universalism, individual rights and freedoms – were widely mainstreamed through a succession of liberal revolutions. Liberalism guided the most foundational democratization process in Europe and beyond, triggering *3 waves of Democracy* (Huntington, 1991), the definite plateau for modernity, universal suffrage, universal access to education and the establishment of a Universal Declaration of Human Rights. While liberal democracies achieved unquestionable deeds in the global panorama, for many they are still far from reaching their fundamental promises of social justice, peace, equality or human dignity.

Chantal Mouffe illustrates the paradoxical nature of the (historical) articulation between the *democratic tradition* – the Athens legacy – and the *liberal tradition* – the

Enlightenment legacy – (Mouffe, 2000) forming what is nowadays the hegemonic, and hardly contested, political system – the liberal democracy. The impossible reconciliation between these two traditions results in the hegemony of one over the other, configuring risks that can be very observable in the XXI century. For example, the constitutional punishing of the will for independence of Cataluña in 2017 represents the very – and absolute – negation of popular sovereignty, in the name of the *freedoms* foreseen in the Spanish (Liberal) Constitution itself.

For Mouffe, liberal democracies feature profound – practically unchallenged – hegemonies that conflict with – and undermine – democratic values such as equality, plurality or human dignity. Perhaps the most obvious ones are capitalism and neoliberalism, with its very peculiar interpretation of what rights are important and non-negotiable. The globalized narrative of economic development as unquestionably virtuous and fundamental in enhancing democracies and people's lives (Diamond & Morlino, 2006), renders the naturalized environment for: production of inequalities; economic domination and the dogmas of inviolability of (individual/corporate) property rights or untouchability of the market.

Moreover, the author mentions that liberal democracies rationalism and universalism constitute threats as well. Behind pretences of 'neutrality', the focus on universal rational consensus naturalizes: the production of exclusion, the elimination of plurality, coercive consensus and the narrative of globalization inevitability. In the other hand the postulate of 'equality' as 'a person automatically equal to every other person' leads to: the abstraction of the individual from the community – individualism –, the reification of the institutions, the banalization of (in)equality, the primacy of a normative equality instead of an ethos of equity, the establishment of human rights as the expression of a dominant hegemony and to the commoditization of rights.

The end of the Cold War, symbolized by the iconic fall of Berlin Wall in 1989, crystalized and celebrated the well-intentioned liberal-democratic ideology as the single, ultimate and superior democratic possibility. Since then, liberal democracies thrive but present an important epistemological limitation – the one of thinking about alternative democratic systems, hence hindering the possibility of critically thinking about the liberal democracy itself. The generated incapacity for auto-analysis might well be one of the main reasons why contemporary authoritarian-like high-level initiatives and politicians are often rendered as a dichotomized *glitch of the system*, and not necessarily as an obvious – dystopian – product of liberaldemocracies, themselves.

Liberal (European) Youth Work

Since the earliest years of the XXI century, *Youth* has been consolidated as a key-policy at intergovernmental level (European Union, 2001), boosting a billionaire-growing budget funding youth work in Europe[1]. Youth organisations and youth workers were financially

1 *For example, the Erasmus+ Programme and Youth Guarantee budgets combined allocated 25+ billion euros for the period 2014-2020.*

and politically empowered to develop a sector, widening up the space for the social participation of young people, under the narrative of *transformation*. As a pinnacle motto, youth work has been endurably resorting in Peter Lauritzen's description of the sector's main objective, "to provide opportunities for *young people* to *shape their own futures*" (Lauritzen, 2006). But is youth work following Lauritzen's motto? Or is it providing young people *as* opportunities for the liberaldemocratic future to keep being shaped?

While the last 20 years blossomed a plethora of *opportunities for young people*, an indisputable majority of those are endowed by the political goals and traditions enacted by liberal democracy institutions. Initiatives such as the European Commission' "Youth Guarantee"[2] – widely implemented in the continent with the collaboration of youth organisations and youth workers – conform young people[3] into a *certain society*. The productive *enlistment* in the labour market is the priority over the *critique* of the labour market, regardless of the global questions that labour market and economic development posts. The *Youth Guarantee* is an example – among many others, in many different forms – of how a European youth policy can paradoxically relegate the *participation* of young people – and youth workers – to a shrinking space of *noncontestation*, where the liberal-democratic project endures and prospers.

The estimated 1.7 million youth workers in Europe (Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2014) might be one of the most propose-full and well-intentioned working class close to young people while, simultaneously, being the most faithful to – and often precariously dependent of – intergovernmental policies such as the ones from the European Union, the Council of Europe or the United Nations. The complicities between European youth work *praxis* and liberal-democratic – hegemonic – values are indisputable. Despite their good intentions, youth workers find themselves with few-to-no alternatives to engage and reproduce what is *suprapurposed* to them under discourses of *inclusion, opportunities, participation*, *transformation* or (liberal) *democracy* (as the single, ultimate and superior democratic possibility).

Aware or not, deliberate or not, the liberal-democratic affiliation of European youth workers limits their agency on reflecting – and on providing opportunities for reflection – about alternatives to the hegemonic and dystopic *status quo*. Hence, the most sociologically relevant shrinkage of youth work space is utterly solid and unprecedentedly growing. A similar paradox is well-portraited by Milan Kundera in his book "*Immortality*", when he refers to some of his modern characters as the *brilliant allies of their own gravediggers*. Their imperative allegiance to *Modernity* was, paradoxically, their immediate solution and their escalating insignificance. Certainly, the European Youth Work is very far from *insignificant*, especially for young people. Nonetheless, the limitations posed by the dominant ideological framework, seriously hinder the counter-hegemonic possibilities, especially for young people. Racism, patriarchy, economic inequality, colonisation and extractivism – as by-products of the Enlightenment empires ideologically codified in today's liberal democracies – may sophisticate, but will remain only marginally contested, as it happened

2 https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1079&langId=en

3 Classified as "NEETs", meaning not in employment, education or training.

in the last five centuries, since when their globalization process has initiated. What can youth workers do to break the social reproduction cycle?

Unlearning and Disengaging

Peter M. Haas theorizes in detail how *epistemic communities* are formed, trough the networking of different actors such as recognized experts and decision-makers *"in a particular domain [with] an authoritative claim to policy relevant knowledge within that domain [...] sharing a set of normative and principled beliefs, which provide a value-based rationale for the social action of community members"* (1992, p. 3). As any consolidated sectorial practice, European youth work raised an epistemic lockdown. I borrow the metaphor I learned from Matia Losego – a youth worker and a friend – which refers to the youth work sector as a "bubble", not necessarily communicating with the other "bubbles", such as the Academy or formal education sectors. Moreover, European youth worker *praxis* affiliates – both formally and symbolically – to an epistemologically installed discipline, defining the values, objectives, resources, frameworks, methodologies, spaces, procedures, timings and assessments for the practitioner's efforts.

Due to the already mentioned historical reasons, there is a strong influence from the European Intergovernmental organisations and initiatives – such as the European Union, the Council of Europe, the EU & CoE Youth Partnership or the SALTO Resource Centres – in the European youth work practice, definitely informed by the liberal-democratic project. The European dominating trends build-up the epistemic environment, including the *reasonable plurality* status recognized in the formal and practical discussions within the community. While a cohere human rights culture in the sector endures in promoting and regulating discrimination in youth work spaces, eurocentrism configures an epistemic limitation, relegating ideas, projects and virtues of many, in particular, the ones disengaged from the future hegemonically chosen for them.

Widening the possibilities for young people – and opening-up the European youth work space for unprogrammed plurality – means unlearning the liberal-democratic epistemic normative, welcoming and accommodating its *beyondness*. By working in two dimensions – oneself and practice – youth workers can embrace the exploration of alternate visions of the world and society, enabling them in their own reflection framework and in their work environments. The following are concrete potentialities youth workers can initiate, both at personal and professional level, to disengage the XXI century liberal democracy dystopia.

Working oneself

Re-urbanizing own's calendar canon – the rejection of professional busyness as a status (Bellezza S., 2017) and establishing a clear calendar allocation for own's interests, such as simple thinking, might help recovering the ownership of own's time.

Reading beyond the usual – escaping European youth work publications can be an important step in embracing the exploration of non-Eurocentric readings. Enrique Dussel and Anibal Quijano can explain how Eurocentrism is a contemporary form of colonial power;

Franz Fanon, Philomena Essed, Barnor Hesse and David Theo Goldberg show how racism is impregnated in (liberal-)democratic states, under the discourses of inclusion; Chantal Mouffe, Jaques Rancière and Salman Sayyid elaborate on the indulged contradictions of the western democratic status quo; Carol Pateman and Silvia Federici provide a clear view on how patriarchy is a dominating hegemony, eventually under the claim of *feminist initiatives*; David Graeber and Erik Olin Wright evidence how Anti-capitalism is not only a realistic idea, but also a fundamental discussion in XXI century; Ivan Illich, Paulo Freire and bell hooks demonstrate the value of disruption, transgression and radical thinking in education, much beyond the ordered, institutionally-led, competence-centred, educational processes promoted both through the formal systems and the non-formal sector.

Learning by writing – more than an important balancing of the epistemic power asymmetry, writing is a way to consolidate thinking, often solving its blind angles. Writing can be a powerful way to organise and communicate counter-hegemonic ideas. Engaging the media (beyond the social media) and academic spaces might counter the solitude produced by the act of writing.

Working the practice

Naturalizing problematization – the common pragmatic call for a *solution* constitutes a limitation for the problematization of structural social realities such as racism, patriarchy or capitalism or democracy. The complexity of such matters requires safe spaces for critical – and radical – thinking, therefore the iterative assertion of the liberal-democratic – *less bad – solution* represents an ideological simplification, favouring the *status quo*. The normative boundaries of the "stable", the "reasonable" or the "good" can be interrupted by allowing ideologic ambiguity and plurality into youth work spaces – everything is problematizable. Welcoming criticism – instead of *bulldozing* it – and rejecting stigmatizing narratives such as "difficult participants" or Unlearning European Youth Work and disengaging the XXI century liberal democracy dystopia "difficult trainers", can provide – contextualized – sociological answers for contradictions faced by youth workers every day. The same applies to understanding the coercive impact of rational consensus in young people reflection and learning ways of validating dissensus in the so-called *participatory* or *consultation processes*.

Disengaging installed narratives – discourse is an effective tool in codifying, reproducing and sophisticating ideas among an epistemically-bonded public. Understanding the symbolic meaning of the discourse used in youth work can help to actively de-construct the – dystopian – narratives aiming to the liberal-programmed futures, such as in:

- *Democracy* – referring to liberal democracy as *democracy*, asserts the liberal-democratic project as the single and unique democratic possibility. Recognizing that modern democracies configurate an hypothesis – between many others – for organisation of societies, allows and validates the broad scope of democratic alternatives, where the contribution of young people is invaluable;
- *Human Rights* – because human rights are normatively coded and automatically

ascribed universally, the assurance of human dignity by the states is dealt with as an institutional procedure, that works for some but (~~can~~) will fail for others. This rational abstraction is naturalized to the extent that human rights (~~can~~) do have a commoditized dimension, compatible with a capitalist economic system and neoliberal initiatives, but utterly limiting when discussing matters such as equality or justice for all. Therefore, while celebrating human rights, it remains important to acknowledge what is still to be done regarding human dignity;

- *Participation* – as a by-product of the democratic-liberal division between two spaces for *demos* agency – participatory and representative – the discourse of *participation* might naturalize the structural asymmetric distribution of power between those spaces, hence rendering the hypothesis of popular sovereignty as obsolete and shrinking the space for young people to critically thinking about the installed model;
- *Competences* – policymaking, the Corporate, the Academy and non-governmental sectors continuously produce knowledge regarding *competences*. This very disputed epistemic environment departs from the top-down perspective of what (young) people *need to develop*, in order to be included in some profile, task, process, space, etc. Whoever defines the competences, sets the canon, having the power to negotiate inclusion (of everyone suiting the canon) and exclusion (of everyone falling out the canon). Competence frameworks became so depurated to the extent of defining what *quality* is[4] (and is not) and what a *democratic citizen* is[5] (and is not). Referring to *competences* requires full understanding – and active deconstruction – of the power relationships and inclusions/exclusions at stake;
- *Transformation* – many contemporary discourses of *transformation* constitute sophisticated tools for reproducing the liberal-democratic order and structural issues, such as inequality. An informed use of the *transformation* concept involves the understanding of the reproductive nature of liberal democracies, by problematizing transformative discourses such as the ones of Sustainable Development Goals, *Green Economy* or *Migration Policies*.

Detaching own's practices from the normative canon – being part of an epistemic community implies bringing its practices into stage. In youth work, this means, for example, to mainstream specific manuals and publications, or to affiliate with the *Project Cycle Management* culture, or to enact certain *non-formal education quality standards* promoted by a pool of trainers. Practices as those do have flaws – often persistent – requiring an attentive, persistent, insight. The critique and detachment of a consolidated practice might be demanding, even overwhelming, but might also be very rewarding for the youth sector - if many people are doing it in the same way it might well mean that many people underthought whatever is wrong with it.

Dissenting from professional self-indulgence – everyday coherence goes much beyond the good intentions' justification. As well-intentioned one can be, making use of a privilege

4 For example, the quality standardization attempted with the "European Training Strategy in the Field of Youth", deployed by SALTO-YOUTH since 2016.

5 For example, in the "Competences for Democratic Culture" published by the Council of Europe (2016).

network for getting contracts or accepting involvement in non-plural initiatives for the income, reproduce problems of the youth sector, leaving behind many young people and youth work colleagues. Diversifying the sources of income may provide more power in rejecting involvement in profitable, but incoherent, activities.

Concluding remarks and a word for institutions

This article explored how the best-intentioned youth work and young people are engaging the build-up of the liberal-democratic hegemonic – dystopic – status. It illustrates how the discourse of *transformation* and *participation* might serve a wider chain of reproduction, even when the issues at debate are inequality, racism or patriarchy. It argues that the liberal-democratic project is hindering the emergence of democratic alternatives. It advocates for youth workers unlearning and disengagement of the European praxis, by safeguarding space for critical thinking. But the critique of liberal democracies should not be misunderstood with the promotion of illiberal democracies or with a *tabula rasa* of the democratic achievements. This dichotomization might not serve neither the purpose of imagining democratic alternatives, or the assurance of the respectively needed spaces. Polarizing different visions works against welcoming plurality within all the spaces claimed to be shrinking.

A possible line of exploration departing from this article may include studying the liberaldemocratic affiliation of European youth workers and young people participating in European Youth activities. Such knowledge could provide scales and figures to many of the posed arguments as well as debating them.

It's not only up to youth workers to challenge and disengage the paradoxical and reproductive nature of liberal democracies. Organisations, particularly the governmental, have a unique and complex role, which is beyond the ambition of this article. The symbolic power exercised by an intergovernmental organisation is incommensurable. While advancing the liberal-democratic project, as their core mission, institutions hold the singular position of embracing, or not, autoanalysis. The institutional limitations for auto-analysis is well-known and visible, for example in education, which crystalized for three centuries the educational model, still focused on grades, meritocracy, *curricula* or competition. How far are we of crystalizing the so-called *non-formal education*? Agencies, Resource Centres, operational units, institutional partners, officers have a definite role in opening-up the space for criticism – the criticism of themselves.

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Contribution #7

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"AN EMPTY BOTTLE? YOUTH WORK IN ITALY, BETWEEN OLD CHALLENGES AND NEW SPACES"

The present proposal aims to reflect on the ambivalent story of youth work in Italy. As recognised from different perspectives, Italy is one of the context in which the practices connected to what we usually refer to as "youth work" have been implemented since the early 1920s, and then through the next decades, both from the catholic associations, as well as from the right and left political organisations and parties. This contributed to define what can be identified as a long "subterranean" story, that however has never brought to a "formal" recognition of youth work as a professional practice, and of youth workers. Quite surprisingly, during the last years the issue of youth work (re)emerged under different forms at the institutional level, both at regional and national ones. This seems to be mainly connected with the contribution (and the support) given by the European institutions and the pushing they produced through the Programmes and initiatives supported (not least, the Erasmus+/YiA).

At the same time, the hypothesis that will be supported is that this (new) attention given to youth work practices is also connected with the "crisis" described in the concept-paper of the Talks, thus (silently) converging toward a process that is "imposing" the need of defining strategies and policies for recognising the contribution of youth work and the role of youth workers.

However, the net effect produced by this ambivalent story seems resulting in a process that – at once – cuts both the most interesting (old) challenges of the "Italian" tradition(s) and the most relevant (new) spaces provided by the European pattern(s) of youth work, thus bringing to a "formalisation" that seems producing a (maybe nice, but) empty bottle.

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Contribution #8

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"WHICH SPACE FOR POLITICAL COMMITMENT WITHIN YOUTH WORK IN FRANCE?"

In France, youth work (animation) has an ambiguous and difficult relationship to politics as youth political movements have always remained rather weak and with few ties with cultural or educational structures. Youth work is implemented by local authorities or by local groups, but the national frame is defined by central state in coordination with the historic youth mouvements which refer to « éducation populaire » (popular education). But this denomination is understood in various ways when it comes to political matters: participation, commitment, emancipation of the individual, resigned acceptance of neo-liberalism or struggle against it. But even the most radical movements refrain from entering in plain politics as they put education first, thus inducing a kind a disdain from political movements. This is not new and dates back as far as the postwar era when the distinction between « political action » and « educational action » was seen as a criterion for state subsidies to youth movements.

Today youth workers, either in their practices or in their justifications seem to be extremely cautious with anything potentially « too political », even if in their personal life they can be strongly politically committed. They tend to avoid burning issues which could be too cleaving and thus promote rather great principles like equality (of sexes, races) freedom (artistic freedom, freedom of expression) but often not related to current events. The parallel which can be drawn with school and its civic education is strong, even if youth work is usually very critical of school and its official neutrality. Struggle against race or sexual discriminations did not originate within youth work in France, even if later these fights were taken over by the general discourse of youth work. The fear of indoctrination and the safeguarding of personal opinion, but also the fear of decline of the attendance of the clubs make the grounds for a king of neutralising of politics within the youth work. But in the same time, youth workers and also the authorities regret the so-called depoliticization of society as a whole and especially of young people. Their answer is simple : more youth work or at least more schemes aiming at reinforcing the civic spirit among young generation. The civic service (Service civique) was created 10 years ago in 2010, on a voluntary basis, but with the underlying objective of being a surrogate for the late military service, which for a century was supposed to be a school of political integration. Today, ten years later, the SNU (Universal national service) for all young people is under implementation and is supposed to give them the very notion of commitment to the community with the very best practices of the army, the school and youth work, (according to the government). Youth work in France may not be skrinking, but some of its principles and values might be at stake.

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