



Youth Active Citizenship in Europe

Ethnographies of Participation

Edited by
Shakuntala Banaji · Sam Mejias

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1

Introduction

Shakuntala Banaji

Engaging with the much-contested concept of ‘active citizenship’, this volume attempts to elucidate the positions and experiences of diverse communities of young people who are called or define themselves as active citizens and activists. It does so at a unique moment in European political history: when a resurgent populist political right is deploying the rhetorics of racial superiority and privatisation using a range of old and new digital media to fuel xenophobic nationalism. The economic neoliberalism that has been the backdrop to multiple financial crises and austerity measures for many countries in Europe seems, ironically, to escape unscathed from much of this rhetoric. Meanwhile, ethnic and racial minorities, migrants and refugees bear the brunt when rhetorics spill over into violence. In some key cases such as Portugal and the UK, many young people’s justified scepticism of elite political institutions and decision-making has seen them abandoning the expected political cynicism to volunteer, vote and mobilise. They do so in the hope of

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combatting climate change, and sustaining or bringing socialist parties to power. In other key cases, such as the Czech Republic and Italy, pro- and anti-EU and pro- and anti-migrant sentiments are more divisive even among young people: some join the Sardines; others join the neo-fascists. Yet, more widely across Europe, the stigma of inexperience, apathy and assumed alienation from politics continues to dog young people's pro-democratic actions. Their contributions to a range of causes are belittled in the media, mocked by adult commentators with opposing political views or co-opted through different disciplinary regimes. In this context, and for those coming of age in this historical moment, this volume asks, what is life like for an active citizen with an interest in the civic and political sphere? How do these young activists think and feel as they go about their everyday lives? Which types of young people become activists and what conditions enable them to thrive individually and collectively in this political atmosphere? And what practices, relationships and motivations characterise their participatory movements, organisations, initiatives and groups?

Contrasting the kinds of insights available to political scientists and sociological researchers of youth participation through ethnography with those more commonly delivered via large-scale surveys, this introductory chapter outlines the methodological and theoretical underpinnings of the ethnographic studies undertaken. Data were gathered across eight countries—the Czech Republic, Estonia, Germany, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Sweden and the UK—between December 2016 and January 2018 for the CATCH-EyoU Horizon 2020 project. The implications of normative and critical ways of conceptualising youth participation, political versus civic life, and the concept of active citizenship (Amnå & Ekman, 2014; Biesta, 2009; Milana, 2008) will be unpacked. This will be supported, in part, by drawing selectively on the project's extended, systematic literature review which covers more than 700 key texts on youth civic and political participation, political socialisation, citizenship, active citizenship and European citizenship (cf. Banaji et al., 2018).

The book departs from an approach that has, in recent years, centred media, technologies and mediation in an unspecified, benign and pro-social civic sphere. Several chapters work with different disciplinary theories from community psychology, development psychology, political

science, policy studies, education, media and communications and sociology to examine the practical consequences of the acceptance or rejection of contrasting normative definitions of citizenship and civic participation. Contributors from six of our project's partner countries—the Czech Republic, Estonia, Italy, Germany, Portugal and the UK—examine the psychological development and the social contexts of a collective orientation to civic action as it unfolds in our ethnographic cases. Some chapters examine the significance of emotion and affect in developing or maintaining activist commitment. Others offer a fresh analytical vocabulary and theoretical lenses for understanding the significance of optimism, self-care and burnout among young civic and political activists. These chapters and the theoretical debates and tensions therein are contextualised and summarised in the remainder of this introduction. Alongside this, the strengths and weaknesses of the overall approach as well as the connections between the cases will be drawn out in a synoptic concluding chapter.

Active Citizenship—A Troubled Concept

At the outset of our project, and resonating throughout this volume, our consortium of more than forty researchers debated institutional and normative definitions of citizenship. Some definitions appeared to encourage an implicitly contractual relationship between (national) citizens and a bounded and bordered state in terms of rights and responsibilities; some positioned young people as apprentices developing acceptable normative civic skills and capabilities, modelled on adult citizenship. Yet other definitions—that we will write about as both more inclusive and more critical—framed active citizenship in relation to histories of injustice, struggles for rights, equity and solidarity as well as in relation to less benign and more authoritarian regimes. Some discussions encountered in the literature simply inserted the word 'active' preceding 'citizenship' with little attempt to unpack the kinds of acts or behaviours considered to constitute such activity; yet others appeared to suggest—at least implicitly, by virtue of the actions centred by survey instruments—that getting educated, being employed and paying taxes are components

of active citizenship. Further sets of definitions insist that active citizenship is comprised of ‘democratic knowledge and values’¹ and full participation in the electoral and civic life of communities and nations by reflexive and motivated individuals. Few of these definitions deal with the tension between the legal (citizenship as status) and psychosocial (citizenship as identity) domains. Almost no writer denies, for instance, that those who are not or not yet legally citizens—for instance, refugees, asylum seekers, visitors, residents—may yet perform acts of citizenship. However, few make explicit reference to this fuzziness—*acting as a citizen without holding citizenship*. Most assume a component of loyalty to and/or trust of nation and government within the parameters of their definitions. Additionally, most of these definitions fail to deal with the following possibilities: that political and civic action may be intermittent rather than sustained; that such actions might be anti-democratic; that voluntary action requires resources of time and capital; and that citizenship itself might be a contested ‘technology of control’ (Amaya, 2013).

While it is unnecessary to recapitulate in full the arguments we make in our 2018 paper on the literature about active citizenship (Banaji et al., 2018), I do wish to draw attention to the key insights we developed there, and to their relevance for this volume. In summary, we found that

on probing the language of texts that use the terms active citizenship further ... a preponderance of literature assumes a shared normative understanding of active citizenship as a more active version of ‘good’, responsible civic and political action, that respects rules and boundaries set by government[s] and nation state[s]. However, when we analysed them comparatively, we found that these terms consistently *mean* different things to different scholars and practitioners in different epistemological and ideological traditions across disciplines... [Meanwhile], the critical, inclusive and also anti-democratic dimensions of active citizenship as both *status* and *practice* remain on the periphery of theory and literature reviews on young people, citizenship and Europe. Further, there is a tension between the significant minority of critical reflexive empirical studies that question the assumptions and power structures underpinning normative views of citizenship and the majority of informative but somewhat unreflexive empirical studies. (Banaji et al., 2018, p. 263)

Many scholars in the social, political and psychological sciences have had a lasting impact on how we think about young people's interventions in political, social and educational contexts (Hoskins & Villalba, 2015; Prior, 2010; Torney-Purta & Amadeo, 2011). In a paper entitled 'A Europe of Active Citizens', The Council of Europe suggests that '[a]ctive citizenship [i]s a value-based concept: a European perspective on active citizenship always should refer to democracy and human rights as founding elements' (DARE, 2010). In accordance with this injunction, Hoskins et al. (2006) define Active Citizenship as: '[p]articipation in civil society, community and/or political life, characterised by mutual respect and non-violence and in accordance with human rights and democracy'.

Unfortunately, many current European member state practices—such as the incarceration of refugees, a refusal to house homeless people, an injunction not to allow asylum seekers to work—are all considered legal and even democratic without being the least fair or just. Ideas of respect for state authorities (regardless of their behaviours), for governance and the law (at any given historical conjuncture, regardless of the fairness of the law) as well as for private property, as indicators of tolerance and justice towards others are intertwined with the notion of appropriate civic socialisation trajectories (Barrett & Zani, 2014). These so-called citizenship indicators are often measured by instruments and scales or encouraged via curricula listing actions that might also, as Westheimer and Kahne (2004), Biesta (2009) and Kennelly and Llewellyn (2011) have argued, serve authoritarian regimes or dictatorships. Indeed, ideal pathways for youth and adolescent civic development, and for discipline and identification with 'successful' adult socialisation often appear to be defined in relation to individualism and neoliberal governmentality—the ability to get a job, pay the bills, pay taxes, vote regularly, follow *and trust* the mainstream news media with regard to austerity and poverty or war and immigration. These ideas permeate the policy documents we analysed across the life of the project and even the views expressed by some of the young, successful, active citizens we interviewed. Some of us found this to be deeply worrying. We felt that it pointed to an urgent need to question and rethink many of the staples of scholarship on adolescent and youth political development/socialisation in favour of a more fluid and contextual, as well as critical, understanding of what active youth

citizenship might look like. Others were unwilling to acknowledge the ways in which the concept was being instrumentalised and its boundaries policed.

In particular, the notion that higher levels of trust in institutional politics and mainstream media indicate successful civic and political socialisation was ubiquitous (Schyns & Koop, 2010; Simmons, 2005). However, many in our consortium felt that ‘trust-as-a-measure-of-active-citizenship’ must be interrogated more thoroughly. We based our reasoning on several tendencies: (1) the conflation of economic and political critiques of neoliberal and militaristic policies with right-wing ‘conspiracy theories’ (about global warming, immigration as white genocide, and so on) in some scholarship on this issue (Douglas, Sutton, & Cichocka, 2017); (2) a scholarly and media failure to question the role played by some mainstream national politicians and media in relation to the spread of disinformation and misinformation; (3) the delegitimising of young people’s civic action against austerity and hate speech; (4) rising hate speech against migrants and refugees; and (5) the undermining of the European Union itself by mainstream media in several countries² (Hoskins, Kerr, & Liu, 2016; Meijas & Banaji, 2018). The labelling of young citizens as cynical, ‘apathetic’ citizens or ‘conspiracy theorists’ (for instance, see the conclusions of Fox, 2015)—and the concomitant failure to assess what and who conspiracy theorists actually are and where those putative conspiracies originate—has been critiqued trenchantly (Buckingham, 2000; Cammaerts, Bruter, Banaji, Harrison, & Anstead, 2016; Farthing, 2010) but has not lessened. As such, it tends to undermine any civic and political actions of young people which attempt to hold national and local authorities to account.

Indeed, even where the intention is to foster a caring community with no obvious links to neoliberal economic policies, current civic education, media and political strategies may not be ‘getting it right’ in relation to young people. Milana (2008) suggests that ‘[i]nclusion through active participation, which is at the core of European educational policy, represents, at present, a communitarian strategy for legitimising the Union rather than a participatory practice aimed at fostering democratic processes within Europe’. I have argued previously, and continue to maintain that a mere instrumentalisation of the notion of ‘participation’,

which does not prioritise young people's real experiences, contexts and needs with regard to democracy, can have adverse consequences and further damage trust. Alternatively, such unthinking advocacy of participation-in-itself can create the conditions for an overarching scepticism that ultimately feeds into far-right populism, as has transpired in several European states and notably, within our project, in the UK and Italy. Readers would do well, therefore, to be highly alert to ways in which the term 'participation' and its referents (such as the one in the title of our volume 'active citizenship', 'civic action' and so on), as well as 'trust' are used (Checkoway, 2011). Although some of the chapters in this volume do take account of the complex histories of these terms in relation to the suppression of dissident/critical citizenship and to the fostering of compliant citizens, others remain more reticent about unpacking the normative assumptions that underpin calls for participation and active citizenship.

From the most critical and self-reflexive scholarship in the fields of citizenship education, political science, psychology, sociology, cultural studies and media and communications (for instance, Amaya, 2013; Banaji, 2008; Biesta, 2009; Isin, 2009; Lee, 2006; Ribeiro, Malafaia, Neves, Ferreira, & Menezes, 2014), we see emerging a powerful discussion. This centres on the nature and contexts of young people's citizenship, and the various dangers, for actual young people, of strict conservative and liberal normative formulations of active citizenship and participation. This nuanced discussion—that neither valorises young people as exceptionally creative political agents nor stigmatises them for failing to meet an assumed liberal adult civic norm in terms of their transitions and development—informs several chapters in this volume. Yet, showing the strength of prevailing deficit models of youth participation and citizenship, it is present only very occasionally in national policy documents (Amnå & Ivarsson, 2017) and is almost entirely absent in the national mainstream media of most European countries. Drawing on this discussion, here, I outline a series of competing and ideologically incompatible definitions of **active citizenship** (Table 1.1).

It will come as no surprise to readers that we came to see these competing—and often incompatible—definitions as informing not only the debates within the scientific literature on citizenship in diverse fields, but

Table 1.1 Competing definitions of active citizenship which structure debates in the literature, modified from Banaji, S. (2016) CATCH-EyoU, deliverable 2.1

<p>The fulfilment of the responsibility by enfranchised citizens to earn a living, to pay taxes, to inform themselves of laws and events taking place in their respective states and regional legislatures, to participate legally in community life and voluntary organisations which do the work of sustaining aspects of community life regardless of how exclusive the community and to vote in local and national elections</p>	<p>This is a classic, widely held, conservative normative definition. It is conservative in that it delinks social justice and equity from civic action, and it is normative in that it excludes a number of other critical or dissident positions that would entail breaking a specific law</p>
<p>Informed and intermittent or sustained contribution by enfranchised citizens of particular nation states to debates, organisations, practices and communities which sustain the democratic governance, human rights, legal and social life of their own and neighbouring nations</p>	<p>This is a simple liberal normative definition. One could make it less normative and more flexible by removing the word democratic. It also currently excludes those who contribute to civic life but are not legal citizens</p>
<p>Any form of intermittent or sustained engagement, debate and/or collective or individual action made by a member or members of a nation state or region in relation to other members of that nation state or region which is aimed to change governance or to alter widely accepted legal and sociocultural norms or practices</p>	<p>This is a non-normative definition which places its emphasis on sustained or intermittent action—it is not normative in so far as it could include far-right activism, extreme religious activism and racism aimed against minorities by a majority that views itself as the primary community. It also includes actions by those who do not hold citizenship status but who reside in a community</p>

Intermittent or sustained action by any member or members of a population, whether they hold legal citizenship status or not, in supporting each other and undermining, questioning, protesting against, voting for or against and holding to account the policies and politics of individuals and bodies who make laws and govern or set the parameters for economic, military, cultural, political and social life at local, regional, national and international levels

Any form of informed, intermittent or sustained solidarity, engagement, debate and/or collective or individual action taken by any member or members of the globe, region, locality or nation in relation to each other, the government, legislature, corporate sphere, media and civil/voluntary spheres in the world, their region, locality or nation, which is oriented towards upholding the principles and deepening the practices of human rights, dignity, equity and democratic governance

This is an **inclusive critical** definition that encompasses actions by far-right, authoritarian individuals and organisations, as well as actions by dissident social democratic youth that break or contest contemporary laws in certain countries

This is a **critical normative** definition favoured by proponents of 'global citizenship' or 'acts of citizenship'. This definition is critical in that it envisages the need to take actions which might conflict with existing laws of a state in pursuit of democracy and fairness, but it is normative in that it limits the actions to those that emanate from pro-democratic, egalitarian motives

also the statements and positions taken within our research consortium. They were also displayed more widely among the young activists in the civic sphere that we were researching. It is also possible to see how a dependence on one or another of these definitions precludes a view of a whole range of youth activities and groupings as civic or as bearing a relationship to active citizenship.

Binaries of Civic Participation

Much of the literature on psychological citizenship and political socialisation produced between the 1970s and the present tends to list and explain behaviours which would be considered normatively civic within the conservative and liberal traditions outlined above. Discussions in the progressive critical literature identify a series of interesting and potentially useful binaries in terms of which active citizenship or participatory civic action can be studied and analysed. These include:

- Old versus new,
- Standby versus active,
- Formal and institutional versus informal, networked and social movement based,
- Apathetic/disengaged versus monitorial/standby,
- Traditional/authorised and serious versus non-traditional, playful, creative, artistic and 'D-I-Y',
- 'Dutiful' versus 'self-actualising',
- Representative versus direct,
- Civil/good versus 'impolite', dissenting and tactical
- Conformist versus non-conformist/critical,
- As-practice versus as-ideal,
- Marginal/excluded/differential versus establishment/elite,
- Social democratic versus authoritarian/populist,
- (Fear of) 'radicalisation' versus (celebration of) 'insurgent citizenship'.

These binary oppositions lie along a set of complex spectra. Some could apply equally to actions taken by young citizens with authoritarian and right-wing populist views as to those with anti-authoritarian, social democratic or progressive socialist views. A common mistake made, for instance, by early techno-optimists was a narrative of new and emerging media technologies as having some inherent proclivity towards democratisation. This was understood as being due to their many-to-many communicative architecture. However, it is a position that has since been shown by more mature studies in this area to be mistaken (cf. Allen & Light, 2015; Banaji & Moreno-Almeida, 2020; Pilkington, Pollock, & Franc, 2018). Other binary oppositions, even if taken at face value—such as those between old and new or institutional and DIY might reduce one set of inequalities, for instance around age, while reinforcing another—for instance, between highly educated and less educated young people. This reinforcing of inequalities where the aim is to avoid them is demonstrated forcibly in the meta-analysis of survey results documenting both institutional and non-institutional forms of participation undertaken by Marien, Hooghe, and Quintelier (2010).

There also exist other problematic binaries—for instance, between self-care and self-exploitation, or between leaders and followers—which readers will encounter in the coming chapters, and where even the most compassionate and critical discussions on these pages sidestep questions about whether and how organisations can survive long-term with no management structure, and about the need for collective bargaining over issues such as wages when the initiative involves lots of low-paid, high-intensity jobs. All of these, taken together, suggest that some approaches to citizenship may have investigated fundamental aspects of young people's interests and experiences of communal civic life in Europe and provided helpful interventions, while at the same time alienating some groups of young people further from formal democratic politics. This now well-documented disenchantment of a significant minority of young people across Europe with institutional politics and the reasons for their opinions have been discussed by scholars examining young people's engagement with or disengagement from democracy and governance (Cammaerts et al., 2016; Loncle, Leahy, Munglia, & Walther, 2012) and populism and far-right youth activism (Pilkington & Pollock, 2015).

Critical studies of youth citizenship have moved the whole field of citizenship studies forward by pointing to inadequacies in current practice and by reorienting public policy towards young people's role and relationship to democracy in inclusive ways. The ethnographic work in which we engaged necessitated that we put aside some of our own normative assumptions—be these about altruism, trust or liberalism—when moving into the worlds of young civic activists. We tried to analyse their contributions from their own perspective before reintroducing critical theoretical frameworks. This detachment from normative theories as a research strategy ultimately reinforced our understanding of active citizenship as a spectrum of historically and geographically inflected orientations to politics and the civic sphere, rather than as a checklist of easily comparable behaviours.

Across all of the observations and interviews for the many ethnographic cases, the interaction and intersection of different demographic and experiential factors with contextual factors (history, culture, political events) inflects young people's civic and political participation and their orientation towards active citizenship in different ways. In all our case studies across the different chapters, discussions with young people indicate that *different pathways into civic activism are heavily inflected by psychosocial identities, and change during the life course*. These civic pathways frequently change even during the span of a young person's adolescence and young adulthood due to psychological experiences and contextual factors. Parsing through all of the data from the different ethnographic cases, it becomes clear that the factors which have the greatest impact on both the capacity to be and the opportunity to be informed about and take action in the civic and political spheres include:

- Political contexts: global/national/regional/local events and processes—war, borders, austerity, neoliberalism, etc., including changes in global social attitudes towards dissent and inequality; and laws regarding protected characteristics,
- Historical and economic processes and events: the global rise and networking of extremist and far-right groups, international pandemics, the austerity agenda and privatisation of services by national governments, the influx of refugees due to conflicts outside the EU,

and changes in laws/criminal justice systems globally (e.g. the decriminalisation of homosexuality, the abolition of apartheid in South Africa),

- Governance and policies: rights and protections in law, welfare and the economy,
- Community and culture: attitudes and values, group positioning and security, diversity with regard to language/race/gender/religion/sexuality/disability, civic and political associations,
- Peers: neighbourhood friends, school friends, subcultures and online networks,
- Families: nurture styles, emotional and economic security, carers' attitudes and values, role models and family politics,
- Schooling: School ethos, teaching styles, teachers' attitudes and values, cultural security, role models and pedagogic environment,
- Media: media formats, linguistic and ideological monopolies, availability of alternative values through media, historical traditions of dissent/free speech, media nationalism, misinformation, and access to social media,
- Personal contexts: disability, crises such as bereavement, sexual harassment, addiction, rape, arrest, or police harassment, other forms of trauma linked to migration or forced migration, racism or sexism, educational success/failure, mental health issues of self, a partner or a family member as well as positive experiences of travel, mentoring and relationships.

It would be unusual for these circumstances not to be intersectional: factors such as race/class/gender/ethnicity/religion combine with other factors such as language/sexual orientation/disability/migration to position young people differentially with regard to political and civic power. In these circumstances, a typology of active citizenship emerges, although it should be noted that the *positions in this typology are not fixed*, and that young people might move between them at points in their lives.

A Typology of Active Citizenship

1. **Generally disenfranchised/excluded** due to an intersection of internal or external factors (trauma, illness, bereavement, abuse, addiction, extreme poverty, geographic displacement, other social constraints such as gender-based violence). There are groups of young citizens like this across all European member states, however ostensibly developed. Many of these are conscious of their exclusion, but have no means or energy to combat it.
2. **Generally inactive/passive/disengaged** due to a combination of internal and external factors (which does not preclude occasional civic activity such as voting or joining organisations or gangs) and also may amount to conformity with local norms and subcultures as these are not challenged. Some just ‘can’t be bothered’, others can be considered to be on ‘stand-by’ (Amnå & Ekman, 2014) until an issue that touches them personally arises. There is considerable overlap between this type and the first type.
3. **Generally active in dutiful and conformist ways** (adhering to the civic and political roles and rules placed by authorities in school, family, community, religious leaders, government and mainstream media—also occasionally to rules and roles imposed by peers: gangs/sport groups) also could be occasionally passive/standby/silent and occasionally questioning/critical on a particular issue. Judging by the evidence from surveys, examined for instance by Hoskins and Villalba (2015) or carried during our own research (cf. Banaji & Buckingham, 2013; Cammaerts et al. 2016), this ‘type’ forms by far the broadest category of young people across most EU member states. They are usually respectful of authority and of peers, accept given notions of success and received wisdom on economics or on what constitute rights and free speech. It is common for those in this category to be unreflexive and/or uninformed about laws and the histories of these laws, unless told to be sceptical by authority figures. This category of youth also includes a small subcategory of young people who join apparently non-conformist pro-democratic organisations in adolescence and adhere to the rules and values of these organisations