

The Association Movement and Citizenship in Mediterranean Youths

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With this article we will attempt to add some elements of reflection on the connection between the youth association movement and the development of citizenship from the perspective of youth organisations and work. Although it is clear that there are important differences between the realities of the Euro-Mediterranean area, we would also like to highlight some common elements seen in the development of strategies of cooperation between youth bodies at the Euro-Mediterranean level. Thus, since 2004, the Consell Nacional de la Joventut de Catalunya has consolidated its cooperation strategy with other youth councils in Southern Europe and with youth organisations in MEDA countries. This cooperation includes elements of meeting, exchange and training among youth leaders and educators of these organisations, as well as the promotion of networks between organisations that can create free and democratic youth councils.

Youth councils are independent platforms that voluntarily bring together youth organisations with distinct profiles and missions, but which cooperate in the achievement of common objectives. These councils also frequently act as representatives of youths in dialogue with other spheres of civil society and public authorities. It is important to keep these structures in mind, given that they exemplify how youths become organised voluntarily and independently to create opportunities and actively exercise their citizenship.

Active Citizenship

When discussing citizenship, we often limit ourselves to the formal aspects of the term; that is, we only consider the legal aspects. If

we only consider the formal part of the term “citizenship”, it would only represent the elements related to the exercising of the right to vote on determined occasions, the payment of taxes and, in some countries of the Euro-Mediterranean area, learning the national anthem and doing military service. Indeed, in several countries of our area, ideas of citizenship and patriotism are confused, and youth organisations are not removed from this interpretation. However, if we see the term “citizenship” beyond its formal and legal aspects and explore other dimensions, we will better understand the correlation between citizenship and the youth association movement.

Thus, in breaking out of the formal enclosure, the concept of citizenship is enriched by distinct dimensions that lead us to consider elements of identity construction, senses of



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belonging to cultural communities, and values in terms of creating spaces of dialogue, not only citizen to authority-state, but also citizen to citizen. Therefore, active citizenship is not acquired or lost in relation to a political state but is generated and maintained as a process in permanent and proactive dialogue with other citizens.

The Association Movement as a School of Active Citizenship

The most generalised vision of the association movement and citizenship within our society involves understanding the work of youth

organisations as an important element within the youth sphere and as preparation for active citizenship. This “future school” approach, commonly accepted in institutions and civil society and even youth organisations themselves, establishes certain guidelines, such as the importance of supporting youth organisations as fundamental instruments in the development of democratic societies.

Clearly, this interpretation offers several advantages; the most important is that the association movement is manifested as a citizen training school, in the formal sense of the term, which varies according to the political system in each country. Thus, in states governed by totalitarian systems, this also means establishing

a control and some clear guidelines on youth organisations. In countries in “transition to democracy”, this interpretation also establishes which type of organisations will be tolerated and supported, and which will not. The democratic states will officially support association movements or, at least, not interfere in the work of youth organisations. In some cases there are even spaces to hear suggestions and ideas that affect youths.

The concept of citizenship is enriched by distinct dimensions that lead us to consider elements of identity construction, senses of belonging to cultural communities, and values in terms of creating spaces of dialogue

In cooperation with organisations of countries in our Mediterranean area we can clearly observe these distinct gradations of interpretation of citizenship and youth association movements. But we can go further: in our view, the real voluntary association movement is not just a school of citizenship but constitutes in itself a mode of active citizenship.

Citizenship in Action

Therefore, the youth association movement should not be restricted to its aspect as a school of society, as it does not only consist of preparing for the future. The promotion of the association movement, active participation in society, meeting with the Other, and the creation of spaces of dialogue are perhaps the best instruments for the construction of a citizenship with a critical spirit. Thus, the youth association movement, when it is free, voluntary and not manipulated, becomes a base for the construction of this citizenship, and it is in itself an essential part for the functioning of society and a clear indicator of its democratic health.

Internal Elements

Voluntary and democratic participation, proposing initiatives, making decisions and taking on responsibilities are inherent parts of the internal elements of association life. The development of these abilities from a voluntary approach contributes to the conscious exercising of active citizenship. We can try to separate these developed attitudes and values into personal development attitudes, social development attitudes and ethical values although, as we will see, it is more an artificial separation than a real one as they are all highly interconnected.

Personal Development Attitudes

- **Autonomy and emancipation:** develops attitudes of preparation of proposals to resolve situations, propose initiatives and make decisions.
- **Thought and critical spirit:** develops the ability to ask questions about imposed situations, prepare alternative proposals and open the range of possibilities when facing distinct challenges.
- **Curiosity and open-mindedness:** maintains the ability to generate questions that seem to have already been resolved by others and promotes the acceptance of distinct responses to the same phenomenon.
- **Creativity:** encourages the search for new creative and innovative solutions to problems that may be old or new.

Social Development Attitudes

- **Communication ability:** develops attitudes to express and communicate ideas in human groups in order to establish understanding of one's own thoughts.
- **Active participation:** consists of questioning, proposing initiatives and establishing decisions that affect us as members of a human community.



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- Democratic spirit: develops the attitudes of listening to and accepting other collective opinions and proposals, even when they are not necessarily in accordance with our own view of reality.
- Solidarity: introduces values that promote the visualisation of existing imbalances and the search for solutions to increase social justice.
- Responsibility: promotes awareness of one's own role, of the actions developed and of their impact on the community. Encourages you to be aware and act, in consequence, as part of society.
- Transformation of conflicts: develops atti-

tudes and experiences related to the search for non-violent solutions and the transformation of disagreements at a group level. Also prepares the bases for peace and non-violence.

Ethical Values

- Tolerance and respect for others: both aspects develop values of acceptance of difference and what is different, as well as highlighting the importance of consideration towards others, their ideas and their culture.
- Human dignity: promotes recognition of the dignity of all human beings, the foun-

dation for human rights. Develops understanding, respect and protection of personal self-esteem.

- Intercultural learning: together with tolerance, respect and human dignity, intercultural learning is an ethical value that promotes the understanding that distinct visions of the same reality can coexist. It also raises tolerance of ambiguity faced with the uncertainty of new situations for which we have not been prepared.
- Gender equality: promotes the values of equality and dignity of all human beings without gender constituting an impediment to personal development.

External Elements

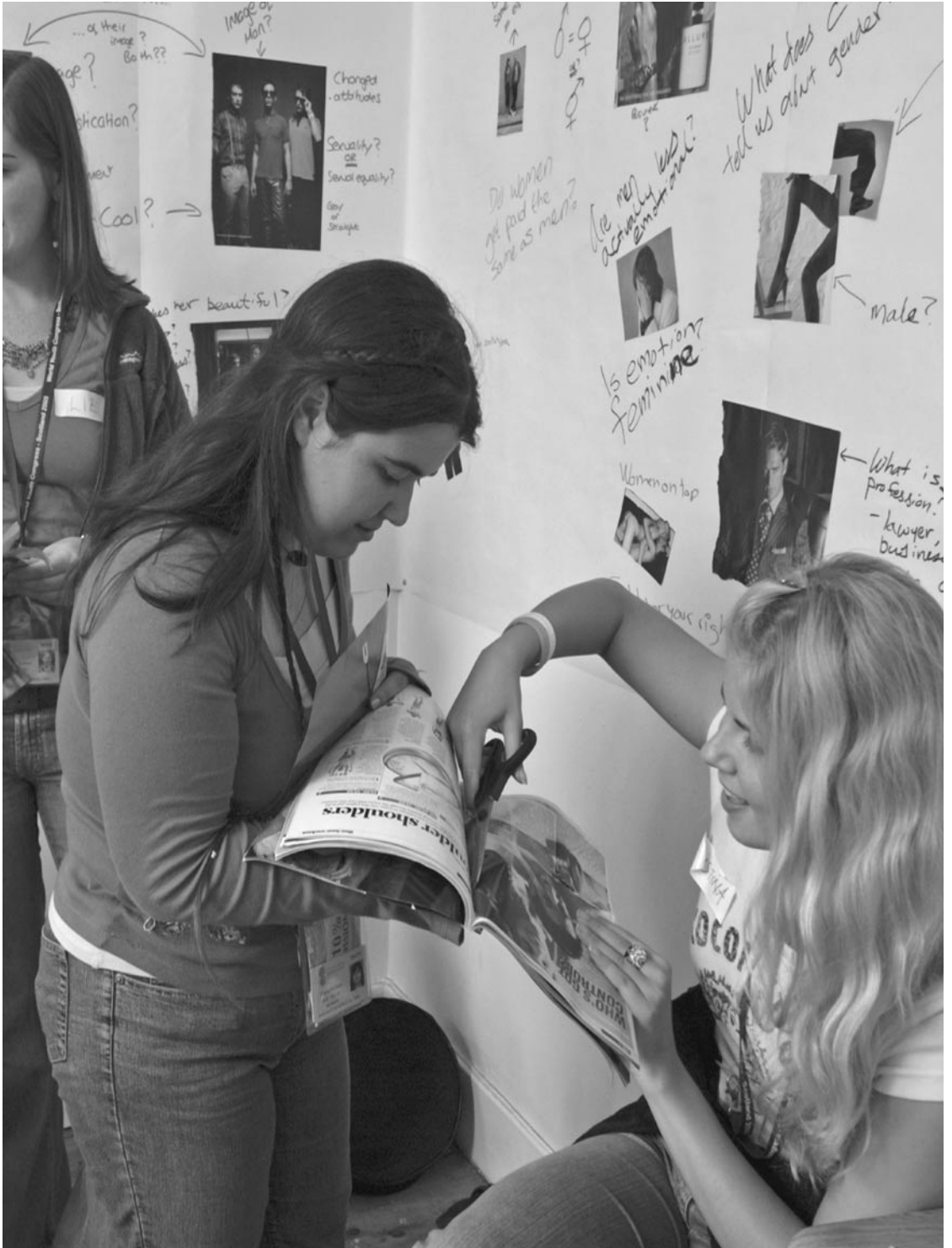
Citizenship is also exercised externally, given that the objectives and actions developed from the association space have a direct impact on the communities in which this space is located, and whose visualisation is very clear at a community and local level. The participation of civil society and the direct connection between the objectives and actions with the local realities are the key elements of the success of the youth association movement. The impact at Euro-Mediterranean level is not so clear, especially because of the lack of a generalised framework of support for the meeting and exchange of good practices in the association and volunteer work of youths from both shores. Once again, the example of cooperation between youth councils offers an opportunity to this work, already complex in itself.

Conclusions

The youth association movement and citizenship are closely linked by internal and external elements. Unfortunately, in the Mediterranean communities, the associations have, in general, few spaces to develop citizenship. A first step to overcome this situation would be the recognition of the experience acquired through active participation in society from the association movement. Moreover, the importance of the impact of the voluntary youth association movement on the communities should be recognised; this means overcoming the idea of the association movement as merely a school of citizenship and recognising its importance in the construction of democratic societies.

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Starting with the formal recognition of the relevance of the association movement by civil society, the private sector and the public institutions, the process should lead to the achievement of a real dialogue between these actors, permitting full citizen participation of youths in all spheres of society. In this process, which the future of the Mediterranean area must pass through, the networks of organisations and the autonomous and democratic youth councils play an essential role as catalysers of synergies. Enhancing their potential means creating citizenship.



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