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Young people and citizenship in the European union

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In the heyday of the nation state, which authors like Giddens (1991) argue is now coming to an end in the 'late modern age', citizens accepted or were given a secure and usually exclusive identity. This identity imposed on them an allegiance which could be mobilised in times of conflict to recruit or coerce them as defenders of the mother/father land. A challenge to this secure identity has arisen with the relative decline of the nation state, the impact of globalisation via migration and diaspora, and the growth of some kind of supranational 'state' in the European Union (EU). The loss of a secure national identity has impacted on feelings of belonging and on notions of citizenship. This link between national identity and citizenship has been recognised by many writers (Habermas 1992, Delgado-Moreira 1997, Colley 1999, Castles and Davidson 2000).

Colley, for example, distinguishes between identity and citizenship ... identity is "more ancestral and visceral" whereas citizenship is "political and functional" (Colley 1999:4). If the "ancestral and visceral" nature of identity is no longer able to be grounded in the nation state of which an individual is a member or resident, this may well have an effect on their sense of belonging and allegiance. It may, therefore, be necessary for the nation state or the supranational state to ensure social cohesion by appealing to other more "political and functional" means through a rights-based polity and political culture. Certainly the current attempt to construct Europe needs to include more than "rather empty symbols" (Newman 2001) that imitate a very traditional nation state approach through currency, a flag and an anthem (Shore 2000). It is only very recently, at the Nice summit in 2000, that the EU has engaged itself in the first serious attempt to introduce a more explicit rights-based polity. There is a realisation that the project of European integration needs some kind of meaning other than that based on instrumental economic and commercial factors. The Convention on the Future of Europe may be able to reinvigorate both the purpose and meaning of further integration.

For writers like Habermas the answer lies in developing a sense of 'constitutional patriotism'. Despite recognising the very limited extent of citizens' rights as promoted by the EU, Habermas is cautiously optimistic. The examples of multicultural societies such as the United States and Switzerland are used to demonstrate that

a political culture in the seedbed of which constitutional principles are rooted by no means has to be based on all citizens sharing the same language or the same ethnic and cultural originsin a future Federal Republic of European States, each national tradition will have to relate to other cultures and traditions, and be connected with the overlapping consensus of a common, supranational shared political culture of the European Community. Particularist anchoring of this sort would in no way impair the universalist meaning of popular sovereignty and human rights (Habermas 1992:7)

Meehan, like Habermas, takes a guardedly optimistic view, referring to a concept of neo-imperial citizenship similar to the notion of citizenship during the Roman Empire. Likewise Soysal (1994) sees within the framework of the EU the potential for the development of a "postnational citizenship". Other writers are clear that "citizenship should therefore not be connected to nationality (that is, to the idea of being one people

with common cultural characteristics); citizenship should be a political community without any claim to common cultural identity" (Castles and Davidson 2000:24)

Aron (1974) and Grimm (1997) question whether such a European citizenship can arise. Aron argues that national and Community authorities provide a group of rights that are of a different order from one another. Furthermore citizens can insist that the nation state respect their rights, while no multinational polity has the same authority. Finally, at the time he wrote in the 1970s, Aron could discern no popular demand for a European federation with all the attendant implications of such a development. There still appears little demand for a European federation among the citizens of the EU; however there may be the beginnings of a recognition that the EU must implement a more rights-based polity. For Grimm the idea of a meaningful common citizenship is premature as there is no European *demos*, the political structures and processes are not developed, and without a common language it will be difficult to envisage a European identity.

This paper outlines the findings from a pilot research project on young people and citizenship in London, Montpellier and Barcelona which asked them to reflect on their own sense of belonging and their attitudes towards citizenship at local, national and supranational levels. Young people (18 –25) were chosen because their expectations and attitudes will shape the future of Europe, in terms both of their allegiance to the EU and their support of the process of European integration.

Purposive sampling was used to select the groups in all three centres¹. More than 50 questionnaires were distributed in each centre (response rate of around 80%) and two focus groups were carried out in each centre between October and December 2001. Gender balance was achieved; however respondents came overwhelmingly from the 18-19 age group and almost all were in full-time education.

Most of the following comments are based on analysis of questionnaire responses and the focus group sessions. All members of the focus group had completed the questionnaire either some time before the sessions or at the beginning of the session before discussion took place. The discussions were structured initially around responses to the questions. The qualitative data from the focus groups was analysed using QSR and the quantitative data from the questionnaires using SPSS.

The questionnaire was divided broadly into three parts, the first section on personal background, networks and identity, the second on political participation and citizenship and finally some questions on European citizenship

¹ D. de Vaus (2002) *Surveys in Social Research* London:Routledge. 'Purposive sampling is a form of non-probability sampling where cases are judged as typical of some category of cases of interest to the researcher. They are not selected randomly. Thus a study of leaders of a conservation movement might, in the absence of clearly defined sampling frame or population, select some typical leaders from a number of typical conservation groups. While not ensuring representativeness, such methods can provide useful information'.(p.90)

Personal background, networks and identity

Our initial hypotheses are that people are more or less comfortable with a notion of multiple identity as a way of self definition. The research has borne this out with a great deal of cross-cutting reference points in terms of identity. Less than 10% of the respondents referred to a mono-identity just in terms either of local (city), regional, national or European identity. Most people had either come from another part of the country to these cities, or come from abroad (c.10%), and many had family dispersed in other EU and non-EU countries. In both Montpellier and Barcelona more than 60% of the population originates from outside the city. Furthermore, many of the respondents kept contact either by phone or internet with friends in other parts of the EU and further afield. The importance of networks which extend beyond family and local place is highlighted by the research.

Home as the primary locator in terms of belonging is important, but it is problematic. Home is where the family actually is, but also in the first London focus group there was the idea that "real" home is back there in the origin of the diaspora. This can be seen either as a dynamic feature of multiple identity, or as a source of tension between actual home here and now and a preferred home imagined somewhere else. One of the respondents in the first French focus group expressed a similar feeling of preferred home, located not where his immediate family was now but where his family came from in his grandparents' region. The London respondent had never been to her parents' homeland.

Although the London respondents felt more strongly attached to their city than the others, the majority response in all cases was a lack of any strong identification with the city. On the other hand, those who expressed a moderate attachment to their city also felt they had more in common with other EU citizens. 46.7% of London respondents felt European, compared to 70% of those in Montpellier and 61% in Barcelona. However over half of the respondents in all three countries felt that people would feel more European in 10 years time (London 51.5%, Montpellier 60.5% and Barcelona 85.2%).

There was no specific question on allegiance, but we can infer from respondents in all three countries that allegiance to the nation state in which they live is problematic. This was most obvious in Barcelona but it was also prominent in London and Montpellier.

A European identity is often defined in terms of 'the Other'. Europe is perceived both by the London and Barcelona groups as being "over there". In Montpellier and Barcelona, people defined Europe as more "open" and more "progressive" than the United States and expressed quite strong hostility towards the United States. There was on the whole, however, a positive attitude towards the idea of a construction of a European Identity, linked to a notion of European citizenship (see below).

Citizenship

For the London groups, citizenship is defined in terms of active participation in the community and local politics. This is almost a good neighbourly idea rather than the far more explicit notion of rights that is expressed by both the Montpellier and Barcelona groups. However, this rather hazy, rather cosy feeling about the local community in London is not actually realised in any form of involvement, either in terms of knowledge about local political processes or active participation in those activities. This is a general feature shared by all the groups.

Many people highlighted the individualistic nature of modern societies, which militates against more active participation and more social solidarity. The effect of job insecurity on social solidarity was also mentioned.

A common theme uniting all groups is the feeling of alienation from the political process, especially in so far as it affects young people. There are no special mechanisms for young people to articulate their wishes, and there is a recognition that they have very little say at any level of politics. 55.5% said they had no say in how their city was run, 62.1% said they had no say in how their country was run and 69% said they had no say in how the EU was run. These findings are borne out by studies in the UK which indicate that age is the most powerful predictor of involvement in conventional politics². There is an active interest in major current issues but no real desire to become involved at any level in the traditional forms of political engagement. Political elites are considered as distant, they are all more or less corrupt and part of a media celebrity circus. Few respondents are members of local associations and voting is more prevalent at national than at local elections. Voting is undertaken by the majority of people but in a fairly lacklustre and mechanical way. These groups represent, therefore, a more committed group in terms of participation with the democratic process, albeit at a very minimal level. The major question remains one of how to reconnect the political process with those who express widespread feelings of apathy, powerlessness and cynicism.

European citizenship

The meaning of European citizenship for most people was expressed instrumentally by the fact that they could travel and work in other EU countries. There was little understanding, however, of the process whereby this had happened. It was presumed as a given, almost a right, which in one sense can be taken as a successful measure of European integration in that its younger citizens now consider that they have a right to travel and work where they like within the Union. The long term effects of freedom of movement may lead to a greater degree of interaction and therefore to more sense of being European. This kind of process has been at the forefront of neo-functionalist ideas about spill-over. There is no compelling evidence, however, that such institutional processes have a great effect on people's sense of being or feeling European. There was on the whole a positive attitude towards the construction of a European space, but there was also a great deal of criticism of its overly economic rationale. From one of the Montpellier groups there was strong criticism of the EU as a neo-colonial enterprise in competition on a global scale with the USA.

In this context there were strong expressions of solidarity for immigrant groups and that they should be accorded full rights, including voting rights. Most participants were nationals of their respective countries, although there were a few non-nationals. There was also general agreement on the need for a more inclusive society. Most of the participants and respondents were well informed about key political, economic and social issues. There seemed a desire to engage with these issues, but not through the established political process.

² Eldin Fahmy Young People's Participation – results from 1996 MORI Omnibus Survey www.radstats.org.uk/no070/article3.htm

Conclusion

The findings of this survey are necessarily tentative given the sampling methodology and population size. There is, however, scope to make some assumptions about young people's ideas about the future of Europe in general and their place and role within it.

Most people feel a need to belong, and they are open to the idea of some kind of European identity. Although there was a positive attitude towards the construction of this identity it came more from a resigned acceptance rather than active involvement, as the process appears so distant. Nevertheless, all those who live in Europe, particularly immigrants and their families, should enjoy equal rights and so feel that they also belong. This is important in terms of social cohesion. However, people will only be held together on the basis of culture - but what kind of culture? Will it be a common European culture that recognises diversity, and how will this differ from the idea of multi-culturalism, which evokes hostility in many parts of Europe?

A nation's collective memory gives rise to emotional ideas of belonging, related through common history, often dynastic, with numerous references back to mythic pasts or 'authentic' traditions. These ideas hold great sway over European populations. The success of extreme right wing parties all over Europe shows how powerful these ideas remain. At the same time emotional attachments to territory predominantly, and in one London case social class, are seen as stable anchors in uncertain times. These feelings need to be understood in the light of basic human needs, despite the findings of the research which reveal that most of the respondents seem to be happy with the idea of multiple identity.

Dennis Smith considers that the EU can succeed if it can provide freedom (opportunity and autonomy), security (welfare and order) and respect (*The Times Higher Education Supplement*, 19 March 2002). Others may doubt the EU's sincerity in this process given, for example, its current attempt through the WTO to force open to competition every public service provider in the world. This was the fear expressed by some of the respondents in the survey, that the EU would challenge the USA for global hegemony, with all the negative consequences of Empire.

Two approaches can be considered in overcoming the current malaise in the EU. The first approach begins through education and the second through reorganising the political structure and processes of the EU. As educators, we can expand new kinds of civics classes which give up the search for common history and move away from "the Periclean warrior defence of cultural patrimony ... and cultural predeterminations" based on exclusion of difference, and accept people at face value. These Kantian marketplace values focus on low-level, weak systems of tolerance, trust, mildness and love (Castles and Davidson 2000: pp. 218- 219). The second approach requires the institutionalisation of a rights-based polity at the EU level which can reinvigorate the democratic process and lead to the creation of a strong "democratic allegiance" (Newman 2001: pp.18-19). The aim is to achieve the seemingly impossible feat of finding the basis of a European identity that engages and has meaning for all its citizens.

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