European *Alternatives* Journal

Democracy
Equality & Culture
Beyond
the Nation State

european **ea** alternatives

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Constantly reminding ourselves that our time is marked by deep challenges, that the global crises we are facing seem irreparable, that growing authoritarianism, the climate crisis, disillusionment with democratic institutions, and the overwhelming power of digital platforms in shaping public debate leave us feeling helpless - how much does it help if we do not create alternative spaces? How much does it help if we do not listen to the voices of those demanding social justice today? How much does it help if those entrusted with the future are made invisible?

And yet, there is a world of young activists, artists, and researchers who are redefining spaces of participation, creating new practices for a more radical, participatory and inclusive democracy, and exploring new forms of education and learning.

In this issue of the Journal, we want to amplify their voices.

Starting from the work of the consortium of Critical Change Labs, the project that inspired this issue, we invite you to rethink spaces that foster critical imagination and alternative democratic practices (*Critical Change Labs as spaces for reimagining society*).

We continue to explore different transnational perspectives on how to build change - through an analysis of the need to recenter youth in democracy (*Fixing the world: if not you(th), then who will?*), the role of edu-

cation in resisting fascist tendencies (*Higher Education Must Champion Democracy, Not Surrender to Fascism*), and alternative perspectives for an inclusive education (*Education, Dialogue, and Religion: Shaping Inclusive Narratives for Refugees and Migrants in Europe*).

Then we look at a few case studies of youth who are making their own democratic future, with a focus on artivism practices, particularly through the work of the French collective Le Bruit Qui Court (*Artistic activism to reshape our democracy by and for youth*), an insight into the intersection of institutions and grassroots activism through the case study of the Youth Council of Monreale, Sicily (*Youth councils and political inclusion: bridging the gap between young people and institutions*), an example of how the simple act of creating a market can become a space for sharing and democratic community-building (*Mompracem Market*), and how Taiwanese youth movements have led to new forms of digital democracy (*Voices of Change: Taiwanese Youth Driving Democracy in the Digital Age*). This ties us into the final section of the journal, where we focus on education & democracy in the digital age with our own rethinking of European Alternatives' social media use (*Reclaiming Digital Spaces for a democratic future*), the need to include young people in the process of democratising digital platforms (*Nothing about us without us*) and another perspective from the consortium of critical change labs (*Knowledge can only be alived if shared*). We close this issue with the poem that inspired its very title: "Ciascuno cresce solo se sognato" by Danilo Dol-

ci — a vivid invitation to imagine not only ourselves, but our democracies, into being.

Through these contributions, this issue of the Journal seeks to not only highlight the voices of those actively reshaping democratic spaces but also to inspire new forms of engagement and collective action. At a time when despair can feel overwhelming, these stories remind us that alternative futures are being imagined and built every day. The question is not whether change is possible, but how we choose to participate in making it happen.

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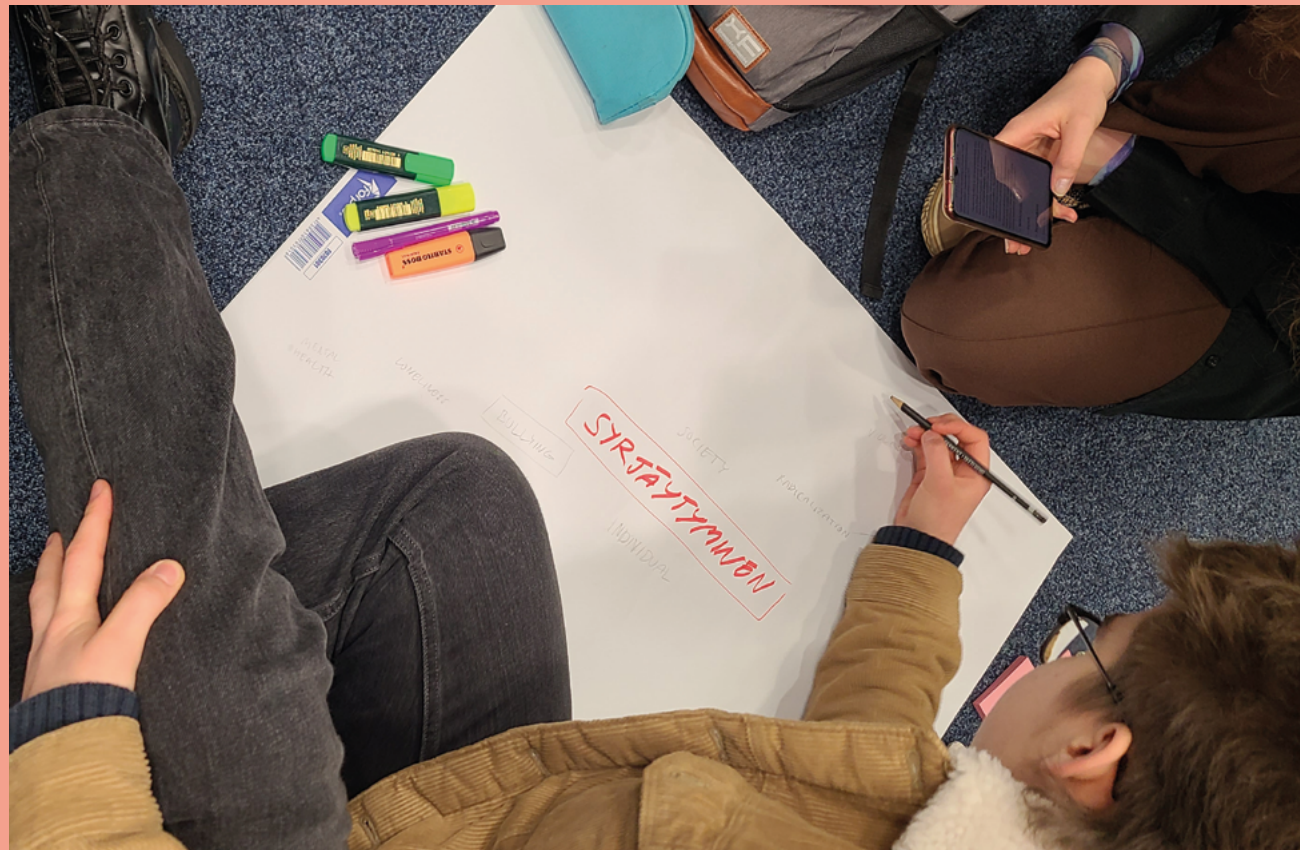
With far-right ideologies rising and ruling, and some world leaders implementing agendas that openly threaten core democratic values such as equality, diversity, and justice, it is not an exaggeration to say that democracy itself is under threat. For years scholars and civil society have warned about the crisis of democracy and the need to rethink it. Addressing this challenge raises critical questions: how can democracy be strengthened? What practices and approaches should be adopted? And, importantly, who should be involved in this process?
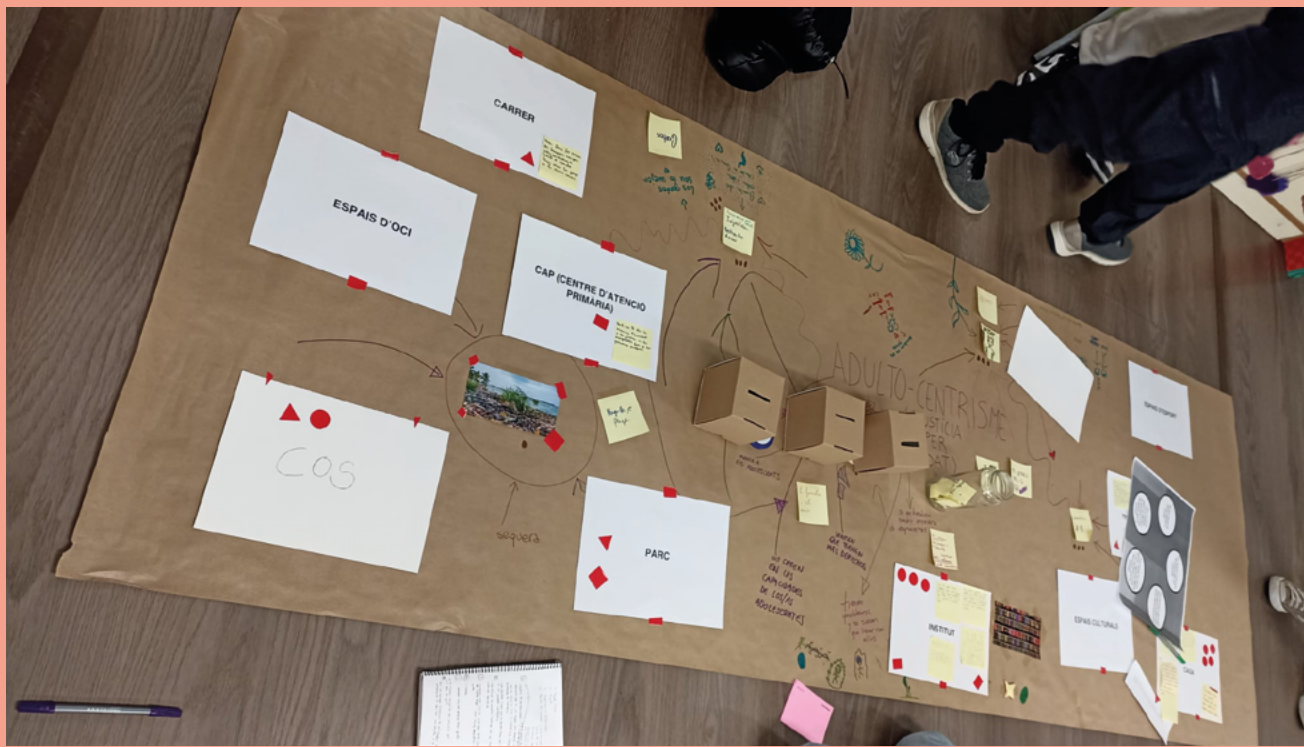
Reimagining democracy is the starting point of the Critical ChangeLab project (CCLAB), a three-year project funded through the Horizon Europe programme, aiming to rethink western democracy's contradictions and to cultivate democratic cultures together with children and youth in what we call 'Critical Change Labs', where young people examine everyday democracy. Young people are at the center of the project as they are among the groups historically excluded from voting, which has traditionally been regarded as democracy's hallmark mechanism. The project takes a stand towards participatory democracy materialized in everyday practices that permeate youth's experiences. From this view, youth not only have a say about how democracy should be but also have the capacity to influence and collaborate with other actors to change the status quo.

A central aspect in CCLAB is the use of arts and creative practices to explore, critically examine, and envision preferred futures of democracy. Our starting premise is not only that we need to collectively reimagine democracy, but that arts and creative practices can be the key that allow us to explore what everyday democracy means, opening the range of subjectivities and agencies involved and envisioning ways of doing aligned with the democratic ethos. It is an ambitious project, and after almost two years from the beginning we have more questions than answers.

For the purpose of this piece, we focus on three Critical Change Labs organized during the first implementation cycle with teenagers based in Oulu (Finland), Barcelona (Spain) and Dublin (Ireland). In these labs, young people (14-24-year-olds) explored issues around I) democracy in the everyday, II) community and identity, and III) adultcentrism. The labs followed a four-phase model starting with (1) *Onboard*: an introduction to the lab, the relations and ways of working teenagers wanted to cultivate; (2) *Question and Analyze*: identifying tensions, moving from the individual to the systemic contradictions and critically examining them from multiple perspectives; (3) *Envision and Act*: imagining what could be otherwise, engaging in design and action; and finally (4) Reflect: jointly reviewing their experiences and what they have learned throughout the process. While these labs shared some similarities in terms of methodology, as well as the use of arts and design techniques, they presented important differences. The main differences stemmed from the learning environments in which the labs were hosted (with some taking place in formal education settings, and one in informal learning context), participants' ages, as well as the overall duration of the lab and the length of the sessions.

At the core of the *Envision and Act* phase is imagining different futures and fostering collaboration among participants. Here, participants build on the tensions they have identified and examined in prior phases and imagine what kind of alternative futures there could be. Deconstructing and disrupting the commonplace (meaning all those ideas and values that tend to be taken for granted and left unquestioned) is an intrinsic part of participants' artistic and creative explorations conducted during this phase. In terms of methods, in *Envision* participants' imagination is fostered through creative practices such as design futuring, fabulation-based practices, and speculative design. Beyond envisioning alternatives, youth are also invited to think about how to implement their ideas, activating change and seeking transformation. Next, we highlight some of the insights gained through the joint analysis and reflection of the *Envision and Act* phase.

Cartography created by Barcelona Critical ChangeLab participants © Marina Riera Retamero

pressed it on canvas bags and t-shirts. These tangible objects became tokens of both personal expressions and conversation triggers with their close communities, formed by their peers, friends, and other people with whom they might contact through their everyday activities. Engaging in making their views tangible provided new ways of seeing, sharing, and shaping the world. Making was not just about creating artifacts, but a strategy to think with and articulate ideas, externalizing thoughts and developing a sense of agency. The physical objects youth imagined and created helped them transform abstract ideas into tangible forms, allowing democratic values such as voice, representation and dialogue to manifest through design and materiality. Thus, the artifacts became more than just printed designs on pieces of canvas and served as a prompt for engagement and interaction by carrying messages that invited reflection and dialogue.

Oulu critical changelab participants creating their designs at the FabLab. © Yusra Niaz

From identifying tensions to envisioning alternatives: radical imagination is hard work

From a research perspective, these approaches are recognized as promising strategies for fostering a range of learning goals, such as supporting critical reflection on current eco-social challenges, encouraging students to advocate for inclusive values in their lives and releasing children's imagination. However, participants in the three labs often struggled in envisioning alternative futures. The challenges that they faced included difficulties in imagining futures that break away from current habits and transcend existing paradigms. As well as this, participants tended to envision utopia without considering realistic pathways to achieve them and struggled to translate abstract ideas into practical, actionable visions.

These difficulties highlight the need to critically examine and reimagine the ecologies of imagination within educational practices, especially those aimed at fostering transformative change. As Bell Hooks asserts, "what we cannot imagine cannot come to be"[1], and "imagination is one of the most powerful forms of resistance that oppressed people can

use"[2]. This underscores the importance of thinking beyond established frameworks to design practices, strategies, and ecologies that encourage both educators and youth to feed and free their radical imagination, breaking free from habitual patterns of thought, thereby opening pathways to actionable and transformative alternatives.

Making democracy: developing a voice of their own through artifacts

At the labs, youth imagined preferable futures about a societal issue they were concerned about. The work conducted during the *Question and Analyze* phase grounded such envisioning, which was conceived as an embodied practice. Imagining democracy was guided to go beyond abstract thinking and was framed as something to be materialized. Through practices informed by the arts and design tradition, the lab participants faced the challenge of transforming their abstract ideas into something that could be made tangible. Whether it was building a youth-centered space, designing slogans printed in bags, or creating zines, the constructive aspect was conceived as another dimension of thinking.

For instance, at the Oulu lab participants used FabLab equipment like vinyl cutters to cut their designs and heat

1.   bell hooks, Enseñar pensamiento crítico, Rayo Verde, 2022/2010, p. 77

2.   bell hooks, Enseñar pensamiento crítico, Rayo Verde, 2022/2010, p. 79

Learning from the past: Futures as an entanglement of various temporalities

What does the past have to do with the future? The young people we've been working with have all participated in the Critical Change Labs that commit to looking at the past developments of an issue in order to analyse its present state and inform visions of the future. In the labs organized in the three countries, the young people looked at the past developments of an issue in order to analyse its present state and inform visions of the future. They created maps, did walking tours, analyzed potential futures scenarios through the futures triangle technique, and did drama role plays. The idea was to creatively engage participants in examining the role that the past continues to play in our present. But why should the process of engaging with the past be important for envisioning futures? Through creatively engaging with aspects of the past we can disrupt assumptions about our present, embrace multiple perspectives, and learn more about the multiple futures that were possible in a given moment.

Research tells us that a key function of brain memory is its role in imagining future events[3]. The ability to remember

our own personal past, and how we use that to imagine futures for ourselves is one thing, but how do we 'remember' events and histories that we haven't experienced ourselves? We do it by constructing the past as a combination of our personal memories and our own and shared understandings of the present. Those important events in the narrative of a family, a community, or an individual - we imagine them, and creative methodologies help us in the imagining. They open up opportunities to step away from the constraints of 'history' and connect with the people of the past, their lives, and their actions.

Through the activities in these Critical Change Labs participants have connected with people and communities from the past. They have brought their perspectives, their experiences, and their insights into their understanding of the present and their imagining of what is possible in the futures they want to create.

3.   Daniel L. Schacter, Donna Rose Addis, Randy L. Buckner, 'Remembering the past to imagine the future: the prospective brain', *Nature Reviews Neuroscience*, 2007 Sep;8(9):657-61.

Critical ChangeLab in Ireland © Elspeth Payne

Fixing the world: if not you(th), then who will?

Myriam Zekagh

YMCA bootcamp, 2023, European Alternatives

Reimagining society: did it contribute to change?

Imagining alternatives towards democratic futures was (and is) hard. In the Critical Change Labs, participants struggled to move from the identification and critical analysis of a societal issue to ideating what could be done to kickstarting a change. In face of big societal challenges, the possibilities of what participants could do seemed insufficient. Were youth able to change anything through the labs? If the question refers to the crisis of democracy at a broad societal level, perhaps not. If the question refers to their own thinking regarding what they can do when democratic values are undermined at everyday level, then yes.

The labs offered a space where youth could critically reflect on what is happening around them and engage in creative activities that enabled them to imagine what could be otherwise. When struggling to make their imaginings tangible, youth were struggling to articulate their voices. We believe that in addition to the crisis of democracy, we are facing a crisis of imagination. While these artifacts might convey modest alternatives to democracy's challenges, we see them as valuable as the labs guide youth to go through a process of imagining alternatives, while allowing youth to develop a sense of agency, and enjoy the process. We think these are important aspects for bringing democratic participation to the everyday sphere and for imagining futures infused by democratic values such as the common good, equality, diversity, and justice.

Join our newsletter to continue to be updated on what we're up to at #CriticalChangeLab. We'll always keep it interesting, and only send you updates for as long as you want us to.

Fixing the world? A daunting task, but someone has to, and quickly. And why not you(th)? Audacity and bravery are key ingredients to personal growth as well as building collective solidarity. The obstacles are many - rigid social structures, lack of opportunities, self-marginalisation - but can be overcome, with a little help from others, such as EA.

Anxiety, depression, are prevalent among youth, and the current news and political development are not helping assuage our fears. To many of us it feels like a time of help-lessness... or a time to take a first step towards fixing the situation. Many people dare to do things they've never done before, with minimal guidance. It's not the motivational quotes that surround us that can bring us the solution, in fact personal development material depoliticize issues. They can empower us in our daily lives, but fixing the big problems that are looming over us requires a collective (and, well, political) approach. It's about finding the tools, and finding the community, to harness the power of the collective. And historical-ly, it is youth and worker movements that have successfully changed the system[1].

So, what prevents young people from being actively engaged - and what can be done to change that fact?

Why not? Rigid and conservative social structures, and repressive context

"Be patient, things will come in due time" must be the sentence I've heard most often in my life. It sparks a frustration that allowed me to bond with many people eager to make a change but unsure where to start and facing the same social pressure: relying on the older generations, who occupy the positions of power. That attitude is one form of social pressure that keeps us in line. Traditional family structures marginalise young people, and this opens the door to many prejudices against them: impatient, inexperienced, "green". In fact the assertiveness of younger generations is perceived by older generations as a loss of control (Yavuzer 99 in Camur 06). This defensiveness can explain why intergenerational solidarity is challenging to achieve, but quite clearly one of the strongest ways to build bridges and alliances. Traditional social structures that place men in a dominant position, coming back strong as seen through the current resurgence of masculinist ideas[2], rest on the notion of social hierarchy, with authority figures at the top and further away from this center all other categories. Intersectional approaches are powerful when it comes to dismantling privileges and prejudices that maintain young people, among other marginalised categories, at the bottom of this ladder.

Individual attitudes can also hinder engagement: feeling that participating in public affairs is something that others do, or that it requires specific qualities, is common. Whether it is impostor syndrome, internalised feelings of inferiority or just the notion that public affairs should be outsourced to a specific category, regardless of the reasons for this attitude, this contravenes the key notion behind our democratic systems that all citizens are equal in their rights, including the right to participate in decision-making. Several factors perpetuate this situation, lack of education to leadership (these skills are not natural, they're acquired), or lack of awareness of what opportunities exist - for mobility to other countries, for increasing skills (e.g. public speaking). By overcoming these barriers, one can challenge their position in society. It is especially directly needed as the lack of diversity and absence

1.   Sunrise movement IG post
2.   For more on this, see EA's FIERCE project - XXX URL

Collective effort, TRANSEUROPA festival 2023,
European Alternatives

of new voices from different backgrounds in decision-making spaces is one of the reasons behind the implementation of the same policies and perpetuation of inequalities.

The risks activists incur are currently increasing, and that is the third key factor limiting youth participation in public spaces. In our polarized world we seek refuge in experienced individuals, reassuring authority figures, taking power. Conservative actors - almost regressive, with the rise of tradition-alists and far-right extremists pushing the idea of a fictional nation to come back to - are put in positions of power, and repression and surveillance of activists is stronger than ever. In this context, daring to act requires a certain acceptance of the risks that come with becoming more visible, as the person who promoted a certain idea. Rest assured that acts of bravery are accessible to each of us and need not be grandiose to be worthy of admiration and respect: the fight for progressive ideas can and must be taken in personal circles as well, as social pressure is an important ingredient in the propagation of ideas.

But why not, though? Seize the help

As we have seen, all of the reasons to stay inactive can be dismantled: it is EA's vision that each resident of Europe is a powerful actor in becoming, and that democracy is a living thing that only works if we all partake in it. But young people bring their specific added value to the mix.

Through their curiosity and as relative newcomers to decision-making structures, they challenge the status quo, by bringing innovative practices and ideas into the conversation. This is why they must be present in decision-making circles, at any level (from school to national institutions)... in such a way that they can effectively engage with stakeholders, and not just be present as tokens or pretty decorations. Roger Hartman's ladder of participation is an excellent tool to assess whether this is the case. Proportionally less burdened with economic duties (family to support) or in a rather sheltered position (in education) from the labour market, young people can afford to take more risks than their older counterparts. Exposed to new ideas through various means (travels, online communities...), they are able to bring new practices and arguments to their social circles, family, friends, and neighborhoods.

One last reason to become active is that there is high demand for it: institutions[3] at all levels are in crucial need of participants, as this is where they draw their legitimacy. An unmissable opportunity?

So, where to start? First, take a big breath, and remember that you can do it. If not you, who will? Bravery is in small attempts at overcoming your fears; success is not even a must. Risks can be managed, limited; more often than not, it is a mind trick.

Working one step at a time makes things manageable. Here is a sequence that we propose to move towards action - those three steps can overlap, but the sequence is important: first, strengthen your skills through learning and practice; second, develop your leadership capacity by speaking out more often than not. Third and last, engage with those who must listen: voters, community, decision-makers - for the latter, listening to what people have to say is literally their job description, so you should not hesitate to be insistent.

Now this is not empty advice: European Alternatives works with young people and activists-to-be from throughout Europe (EU and beyond) on all three of these steps. Through our ongoing Speak-out webinar series and the upcoming Youth Movement and Campaign Accelerator - and many more activities, from cultural festivals to democratic citizen assemblies - EA can help you build your skills, accompany you in the actions you develop and lead in your area, and finally offer mutual support, find mentors and a network of like-minded individuals. EA's youth programmes are precisely meant for activists-to-be to put a foot in the door and join a community of transnational doers, to draw inspiration from.

Of all the arguments that make us feel small, alone and powerless, we must not forget Margaret Mead's words: "never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; it's the only thing that ever has".

3.   See for instance the EU 22-27 youth strategy

Higher Education Must Champion Democracy, Not Surrender to Fascism

Critical education must become a key organizing principle to defeat the emerging authoritarianism in the US

Henry A. Giroux

Strike, Santiago "The struggle belongs to the whole society. All for free education." July 26, 2011

For decades, neoliberalism has systematically attacked the welfare state, undermined public institutions and weakened the foundations of collective well-being. Shrouded in the alluring language of liberty, it transforms market principles into a dominant creed, insisting that every facet of life conform to the imperatives of profit and economic efficiency.

But in reality, neoliberalism consolidates wealth in the hands of a financial elite, celebrates ruthless individualism, promotes staggering levels of inequality, perpetuates systemic injustices like racism and militarism, and commodifies everything, leaving nothing sacred or untouchable. Neoliberalism operates as a relentless engine of capitalist accumulation, driven by an insatiable pursuit of unchecked growth and the ruthless concentration of wealth and power within the hands of a ruling elite. At its core, it's a pedagogy of repression: crushing justice, solidarity and care while deriding

critical education and destroying the very tools that empower citizens to resist domination and reclaim the promise of democracy.

As neoliberalism collapses into authoritarianism, its machinery of repression intensifies. Dissent is silenced, social life militarized and hate normalized. This fuels a fascistic politics which is systematically dismantling democratic accountability, with higher education among its primary targets. For years, the far right has sought to undermine education, recognizing it as a powerful site of resistance. This has only accelerated, as MAGA movement adherents seek to eliminate the public education threat to their authoritarian goals.

Vice President-elect J.D. Vance openly declared "the professors are the enemy." President-elect Donald Trump has stated that "pink-haired communists [are] teaching our

kids." In response to the Black Lives Matter protests following George Floyd's killing, MAGA politicians like Sen. Tom Cotton openly called for deploying military force against demonstrators.

The authoritarian spirit driving this party is crystallized in the words of right-wing activist Jack Posobiec, who, at the 2023 Conservative Political Action Conference, said: "We are here to overthrow democracy completely. We didn't get all the way there on January 6, but we will. After we burn that swamp to the ground, we will establish the new American republic on its ashes." This is more than anti-democratic, authoritarian rhetoric. It also shapes poisonous policies in which education is transformed into an animating space of repression and violence, and becomes weaponized as a tool of censorship, conformity and discrimination.

As authoritarianism surges globally, democracy is being dismantled. What does this rise in illiberal regimes mean for higher education? What is the role of universities in defending democratic ideals when the very notion of democracy is under siege? In Trump's United States, silence is complicity, and inaction a moral failing. Higher education must reassert itself as a crucial democratic public sphere that fosters critical thought, resists tyranny and nurtures the kind of informed citizens necessary to a just society.

Trump's return to the presidency marks the endpoint of a deeply corrupt system, one that thrives on anti-intellectualism, scorn for science and contempt for reason. In this political climate, corruption, racism and hatred have transformed into a spectacle of fear, division and relentless disinformation, supplanting any notion of shared responsibility or collective purpose. In such a degraded environment, democracy becomes a hollowed-out version of itself, stripped of its legitimacy, ideals and promises. When democracy loses its moral and aspirational appeal, it opens the door for autocrats like Trump to dismantle the very institutions vital to preserving democratic life.

The failure of civic culture, education and literacy is starkly evident in the Trump administration's success at emptying language of meaning — a flight from historical memory, ethics, justice and social responsibility. Communication has devolved into exaggerated political rhetoric and shallow public relations, replacing reason and evidence with spectacle and demaguery. Thinking is scorned as dangerous, and news often serves as an amplifier for power rather than a check on it.

Corporate media outlets, driven by profits and ratings, align themselves with Trump's dis-imagination machine, perpetuating a culture of celebrity worship and reality-TV sensationalism. In this climate, the institutions essential to a vibrant civil society are eroding, leaving us to ask: What kind of democracy can survive when the foundations of the social fabric are collapsing? Among these institutions, the mainstream media — a cornerstone of the fourth estate — have been particularly compromised. As Heather McGhee notes, the right-wing media has, over three decades, orchestrated "a radical takeover of our information ecosystem."

Universities' Neoliberal Audit Culture

As public-sector support fades, many institutions of higher education have been forced to mirror the private sector, turning knowledge into a commodity and eliminating departments and courses that don't align with the market's bottom line. Faculty are increasingly treated like low-wage workers, with labor relations designed to minimize costs and maximize servility. In this climate, power is concentrated in the hands of a managerial class that views education through a market-driven lens, reducing both governance and teaching to mere instruments of economic need. Democratic and creative visions, along with ethical imagination, give way to calls for efficiency, financial gain and conformity.

This neoliberal model not only undermines faculty autonomy but also views students as mere consumers, while saddling them with exorbitant tuition fees and a precarious future shaped by economic instability and ecological crisis. In abandoning its democratic mission, higher education fixates on narrow notions of job-readiness and cost-efficiency, forsaking its broader social and moral responsibilities. Stripped of any values beyond self-interest, institutions retreat from fostering critical citizenship and collective well-being.

Pedagogy, in turn, is drained of its critical content and transformative potential. This shift embodies what Cris Shore and Susan Wright term an "audit culture" — a corporate-driven ethos that depoliticizes knowledge, faculty and students by prioritizing performance metrics, measurable outputs and rigid individual accountability over genuine intellectual and social engagement.

In this process, higher education relinquishes its role as a democratic public sphere, shifting its mission from cultivating engaged citizens to molding passive consumers. This transformation fosters a generation of self-serving individuals, disconnected from the values of solidarity and justice, and indifferent to the creeping rise of authoritarianism.

The suppression of student dissent on campuses this year, particularly among those advocating for Palestinian rights and freedom, highlights this alarming trend. Universities increasingly prioritize conformity and corporate interests, punishing critical thinking and democratic engagement in the process. These developments lay the groundwork for a future shaped not by collective action and social equity, but by privatization, apathy and the encroachment of fascist politics.

Education, once the bedrock of civic engagement, has become a casualty in the age of Trump, where civic illiteracy is celebrated as both virtue and spectacle. In a culture dominated by information overload, celebrity worship and a cutthroat survival ethic, anti-intellectualism thrives as a political weapon, eroding language, meaning and critical thought. Ignorance is no longer passive — it is weaponized, fostering a false solidarity among those who reject democracy and scorn reason. This is not innocent ignorance but a calculated refusal to think critically, a deliberate rejection of language's role in the pursuit of justice. For the ruling elite and the modern Republican Party, critical thinking is vilified as a threat to power, while willful ignorance is elevated to a badge of honor.

If we are to defeat the emerging authoritarianism in the U.S., critical education must become a key organizing principle of politics. In part, this can be done by exposing and unraveling lies, systems of oppression, and corrupt relations of power while making clear that an alternative future is possible. The language of critical pedagogy can powerfully condemn untruths and injustices.

History's Emancipating Potential

A central goal of critical pedagogy is to cultivate historical awareness, equipping students to use history as a vital lens for understanding the present. Through the critical act of remembrance, the history of fascism can be illuminated not as a relic of the past but as a persistent threat, its dormant traces capable of reawakening even in the most robust democracies. In this sense, history must retain its subversive function — drawing on archives, historical sources, and suppressed narratives to challenge conventional wisdom and dominant ideologies.

The subversive power of history lies in its ability to challenge dominant narratives and expose uncomfortable truths — precisely why it has become a prime target for right-wing forces determined to rewrite or erase it. From banning books and whitewashing historic injustices like slavery to punishing educators who address pressing social issues, the assault on history is a calculated effort to suppress critical thinking and maintain control. Such assaults on historical memory represent a broader attempt to silence history's emancipatory potential, rendering critical pedagogy an even more urgent and essential practice in resisting authoritarian forces. These assaults represent both a cleansing of history and what historian Timothy Snyder calls "anticipatory obedience," which he labels as behavior individuals adopt in the service of emerging authoritarian regimes.

The fight against a growing fascist politics around the world is more than a struggle over power, it is also a struggle to reclaim historical memory. Any fight for a radical democratic socialist future is doomed if we fail to draw transformative lessons from the darkest chapters of our history, using them to forge meaningful resolutions and pathways toward a post-capitalist society. This is especially true at a time when the idea of who should be a citizen has become less inclusive, fueled by toxic religious and white supremacist ideology.

Consciousness-Shifting Pedagogy

One of the challenges facing today's educators, students and others is the need to address the question of what education should accomplish in a historical moment when it is slipping into authoritarianism. In a world in which there is an increasing abandonment of egalitarian and democratic impulses, what will it take to educate young people and the broader polity to hold power accountable?

In part, this suggests developing educational policies and practices that not only inspire and motivate people but are also capable of challenging the growing number of anti-democratic tendencies under the global tyranny of capitalism. Such a vision of education can move the field beyond its obsession with accountability schemes, market values, and unreflective immersion in the crude empiricism of a data-obsessed, market-driven society. It can also confront the growing assault on education, where right-wing forces seek to turn universities into tools of ideological tyranny — arenas of pedagogical violence and white Christian indoctrination.

Any meaningful vision of critical pedagogy must have the power to provoke a radical shift in consciousness — a shift that helps us see the world through a lens that confronts the savage realities of genocidal violence, mass poverty, the destruction of the planet and the threat of nuclear war, among other issues. A true shift in consciousness is not possible without pedagogical interventions that speak directly to peo-

ple in ways that resonate with their lives, struggles and experiences. Education must help individuals recognize themselves in the issues at hand, understanding how their personal suffering is not an isolated event, but part of a systemic crisis. In addition, activism, debate and engagement should be central to a student's education.

In other words, there can be no authentic politics without a pedagogy of identification — an education that connects people to the broader forces shaping their lives, an education that helps them imagine and fight for a world where they are active agents of change.

The poet Jorie Graham emphasizes the importance of engaging people through experiences that resonate deeply with their everyday lives. She states that "it takes a visceral connection to experience itself to permit us to even undergo an experience." Without this approach, pedagogy risks reinforcing a broader culture engrossed in screens and oversimplifications. In such a context, teaching can quickly transform into inaccessible jargon that alienates rather than educates.

Resisting Educational "Neutrality"

In the current historical moment, education cannot surrender to the call of academics who now claim in the age of Trump that there is no room for politics in the classroom, or the increasing claim by administrators that universities have a responsibility to remain neutral. This position is not only deeply flawed but also complicit in its silence over the current far right politicization of education.

The call for neutrality in many North American universities is a retreat from social and moral responsibility, masking the reality that these institutions are deeply embedded in power relations. As Heidi Matthews, Fatima Ahdash and Priya Gupta aptly argue, neutrality "serves to flatten politics and silence scholarly debate," obscuring the inherently political nature of university life. From decisions about enrollment and research funding to event policies and poster placements, every administrative choice reflects a political stance. Far from apolitical, neutrality is a tool that silences dissent and shields power from accountability.

It is worth repeating that the most powerful forms of education today extend far beyond public and higher education. With the rise of new technologies, power structures and social media, culture itself has become a tool of propaganda. Right-wing media, conservative foundations, and a culture dominated by violence and reality TV created the fertile ground for the rise of Trump and his continued legit-

imacy. Propaganda machines like Fox News have fostered an anti-intellectual climate, normalizing Trump's bigotry, lies, racism and history of abuse. This is not just a political failure — it is an educational crisis.

In the age of new media, platforms like Elon Musk's X and tech giants like Facebook, Netflix and Google have become powerful teaching machines, actively serving the far right and promoting the values of gangster capitalism. These companies are reshaping education, turning it into a training ground for workers who align with their entrepreneurial vision or, even more dangerously, perpetuating a theocratic, ultra-nationalist agenda that views people of color and marginalized groups as threats. This vision of education must be rejected in the strongest terms, for it erodes both democracy and the very purpose of education itself.

Education as Mass Mobilization

Education, in its truest sense, must be about more than training students to be workers or indoctrinating them into a white Christian nationalist view of who does and doesn't count as American. Education should foster intellectual rigor and critical thinking, empowering students to interrogate their experiences and aspirations while equipping them with the agency to act with informed judgment. It must be a bold and supportive space where student voices are valued and engaged with pressing social and political issues, cultivating a commitment to justice, equality and freedom. In too many classrooms in the U.S., there are efforts to make students voiceless, which amounts to making them powerless. This must be challenged and avoided at all times.

Critical pedagogy must expose the false equivalence of capitalism and democracy, emphasizing that resisting fascism requires challenging capitalism. To be transformative, it should embrace anti-capitalist principles, champion radical democracy and envision political alternatives beyond conventional ideologies.

In the face of growing attacks on higher education, educators must reclaim their role in shaping futures, advancing a vision of education as integral to the struggle for democracy. This vision rejects the neoliberal framing of education as a private investment and instead embraces a critical pedagogy as a practice of freedom that disrupts complacency, fosters critical engagement, and empowers students to confront the forces shaping their lives.

In an age of resurgent fascism, education must do more than defend reason and critical judgment — it must also mobilize widespread, organized collective resistance. A number of youth movements, from Black Lives Matter and the Sunrise Movement to Fridays for Future and March for Our Lives, are mobilizing in this direction. The challenge here is to bring these movements together into one multiracial, working-class organization.

The struggle for a radical democracy must be anchored in the complexities of our time — not as a fleeting sentiment but as an active, transformative project. Democracy is not simply voting, nor is it the sum of capitalist values and market relations. It is an ideal and promise — a vision of a future that does not imitate the present; it is the lifeblood of resistance, struggle, and the ongoing merging of justice, ethics and freedom.

In a society where democracy is under siege, educators must recognize that alternative futures are not only possible but that acting on this belief is essential to achieving social change.

The global rise of fascism casts a long shadow, marked by state violence, silenced dissent and the assault on critical thought. Yet history is not a closed book — it is a call to action, a space for possibility. Now, more than ever, we must dare to think boldly, act courageously, and forge the democratic futures that justice demands and humanity deserves.

Education, Dialogue, and Religion: Shaping Inclusive Narratives for Refugees and Migrants in Europe

Stephen Ogbonna

Asylum seekers and refugees often confront significant mental health challenges stemming from traumatic experiences and displacement. International research reveals that these individuals endure multiple stages of migration, each marked by distressing events that severely impact their mental and physical well-being[1]. The cumulative effect of these adversities frequently leads to a gradual erosion of self-esteem, hindering their ability to integrate into new communities and fully contribute to their host societies[2]. In the face of such adversity, the combined strengths of education, intercultural dialogue, and the powers of religion and spirituality can provide pathways to healing, integration, and empowerment. This article explores the role of education, intercultural dialogue, and spiritual practices in transforming the narratives surrounding refugees and migrants in Europe. Drawing on academic theories and lived experiences, it contends that a holistic, integrative approach is essential for addressing the complexities of forced migration and fostering resilient, inclusive communities

Trauma, Displacement, and the Quest for Home

Trauma is defined as exposure to intense physical and psychological distress resulting from harmful or life-threatening events that can lead to long-lasting effects on an individual's physical, emotional, social, and spiritual well-being[3]. Renos K. Papadopoulos argues that the experience of people seeking asylum is not only defined by trauma, as each experiences trauma differently, but what they all have in common is the loss of "home."[4] Papadopoulos asserts that home is not just a physical space as it represents a network of meanings, cultural connections, familial relationships, and dreams that suddenly become inaccessible[5]. He states, "The loss of a home is not just the loss of shelter but the disintegration of a network of meanings that provided coherence to the refugee's identity."[6] Furthermore, the uncertainty about their

The Role of Education: Empowerment Through Learning

Education is a powerful catalyst for transformative change. As noted by UNHCR, it offers more than vocational training to refugees and migrants—it is essential for reclaiming identity, building confidence, and integrating into new societies.[10] Inclusive educational learning provides safe spaces where displaced individuals can learn new languages, acquire technical skills, and understand the values of their new homes.[11] Such environments empower refugees to bridge the gap between their traumatic pasts and future opportunities.

Moreover, education enables asylum seekers and refugees to utilise their religious and spiritual practices as coping mechanisms by acknowledging and integrating the diverse cultural traditions they bring from their home countries.[12] In many migrant communities, these practices are central to cultural identity and offer crucial emotional and psychological support.[13] Gearon and Kuusisto, in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Education*, emphasise that when schools recognise these practices as valuable, they help mitigate the trauma of displacement by reinforcing cultural continuity and personal agency.[14]

Agostino Portera argues that an intercultural approach to learning is vital because it values cultural diversity and enhances the educational experience.[15] He emphasizes the importance of curricula, teaching strategies, and classroom settings that acknowledge students varied cultural, religious, and social backgrounds. Similarly, Samuel Habtemariam advocates for culturally responsive pedagogy that validates students' lived experiences and encourages them to share their cultural narratives.[16] Incorporating subjects like comparative religious studies, multicultural literature, and discussions on spirituality's role in resilience helps refugee students appreciate their cultural and spiritual identities.[17]

However, many European educators remain unaware of the crucial role religion and spirituality play in refugee coping strategies.[18] To address this, professional development and teacher training programs must include intercultural competence, trauma-informed pedagogy, and the significance of non-Western spiritual practices, ensuring that classrooms respect and nurture spiritual expression without marginalization.[19]

Dialogue as a Bridge: Intercultural and Interfaith Communication

Intercultural education is crucial for encouraging dialogue. As noted by Rapanta and Trovão, it promotes intercultural understanding and underscores the importance of open and respectful communication among people from diverse backgrounds.[20] Dialogue acts as an essential bridge between communities in a world frequently divided by cultural and religious divides. For refugees and migrants, participating in intercultural and interfaith dialogue is transformative. This type of dialogue offers a space for sharing stories, tackling misconceptions, and promoting mutual understanding between host communities and displaced individuals; moreover, it creates a "third space" where people can negotiate identities, resolve differences, and imagine shared futures. This concept is particularly valuable for refugees who live between two worlds: the memory of a lost home and the reality of an unfamiliar new environment. In these neutral spaces, refugees can share their experiences and aspirations whilst host communities learn to value the richness of diverse cultural backgrounds.

Religion and Spirituality: Pathways to Healing and Resilience

Lucy Grimwade and Christopher Cook describe spirituality as a profound inner journey through which individuals seek purpose, meaning, and connection to a transcendent force—a sustaining presence greater than oneself[21]. Drawing from my experiences as a refugee, I have witnessed how spirituality can serve as a reservoir of strength and resilience. For many displaced individuals, it acts as an anchor during times of crisis and uncertainty, nurturing inner peace, fostering belonging, and bridging the gap to the divine. Paudyal et al. argue that this spiritual connection provides a framework for finding meaning in hardship, cultivating hope, and maintaining emotional stability amid the challenges of displacement.[22] In distinguishing spirituality from religion, Grimwade and Cook assert that religion is a codified expression of spirituality characterized by shared beliefs, rituals, and structured practices cantered around a deity- often including formal ceremonies, congregations, and established rules.[23] In contrast, spirituality allows individuals to interpret and make sense of life through their unique worldview, offering a framework for understanding existence, purpose, and meaning without necessarily relying on structured doctrines or communal rituals.[24] This viewpoint is consistent with the research conducted by Paudyal et al. and Pieter Dronkers, which emphasises the role spirituality plays in restoring the mental health and personhood of many refugees.[25]

future often leads to complex mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, PTSD, survivor's guilt, and suicidal thoughts[7]. These challenges are compounded by systemic barriers such as language difficulties, inadequate housing, harsh immigration policies, and social discrimination[8]. Yet amid such overwhelming hardship, spirituality often emerges as an essential coping mechanism for people seeking asylum, finding in it not only solace but also a renewed sense of purpose[9].

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Spirituality in Secular Contexts:
The Case Of Germany

In the UK, chaplaincy, particularly multifaith chaplaincy, plays a vital role in holistic care by providing essential spiritual support that facilitates patient recovery and enhances overall well-being.[26] This model can also be incorporated into migration practices across Europe, helping refugees leverage their existing spirituality as a vital coping mechanism during resettlement.[27] Huguelet and Koening note that by neglecting to incorporate these aspects into the recovery process, clinicians miss the opportunity to use spirituality as a strategy for alleviating the suffering caused by psychiatric disorders.[28]

The article by Daniel Engel et al. argues that in secular societies like Germany—a country historically influenced by Protestant and Catholic Christianity but now defined by a constitutional separation of church and state and a significant non-religious population—the role of spirituality in the lives of refugees is both essential and contested[29]. Engel notes that scholars have observed that refugees, particularly those from Muslim-majority contexts, often exhibit a level of religiosity that is significantly higher than that of the average individual German, indicating that the religious practices and spiritual expressions of refugees differ significantly from those of the host community.[30]

Engel contends that this divergence can lead to scepticism and cultural tensions, especially in a secular context, where religious expression is often viewed as a private matter and many citizens lack strong religious affiliations, the overt religiosity of refugees may be seen as a barrier to integration.[31] Daniel Engel notes that such perceptions risk reinforcing stereotypes, marginalising refugees, and fostering social exclusion.[32] For refugees, whose spiritual practices serve as crucial coping mechanisms against the trauma of displacement, these challenges can exacerbate the difficulties they encounter in resettlement. However, the challenges of secular settings highlight the importance of inclusive, culturally sensitive approaches. Integrating spirituality into mainstream support services—such as through multi-faith chaplaincy and trauma-informed care models—provides a means to bridge the gap between refugees' spiritual needs and the secular norms of the host society. In doing so, these approaches affirm the significance of spiritual well-being as a vital component of overall health, fostering environments in which diverse beliefs are respected rather than seen as obstacles to integration.

Integrating Approaches: Towards Holistic and Inclusive Narratives

Refugees and migrants face complex challenges that require multifaceted solutions. Education, dialogue, and religion intersect to foster resilience, empower individuals, and build inclusive communities. An integrative approach recognizes that education can serve as a platform for dialogue while intercultural and interfaith exchanges enrich learning and deepen spiritual understanding. A key benefit of this integrated model is its ability to create holistic support systems. Trauma-informed educational programs not only impart academic skills but also provide psychological support through narrative therapy, storytelling circles, and mindfulness exercises.[33] These interventions help students process traumatic experiences, rebuild their identities, and reduce anxiety and depression, ultimately fostering a sense of belonging in new communities. Community dialogue initiatives, which bring together refugees, local residents, and faith leaders, help break down barriers of isolation and mistrust.[34] In safe, neutral spaces, participants challenge stereotypes, share personal experiences, and learn from one another, contributing to inclusive narratives that celebrate diversity and affirm individual dignity.

Religious and spiritual practices further enhance the healing process. Multi-faith chaplaincy offers a culturally sensitive model of spiritual care that ensures no one is excluded because of their religious identity. This approach helps individuals reconnect with their spiritual selves and strengthens community solidarity. Case studies across Europe—particularly in the United Kingdom—demonstrate that combining spiritual education with trauma-informed counselling significantly improves mental health, optimism, and agency among refugees. Such integrated interventions not only restore dignity but also pave the way for smoother integration into host societies.

Challenges and Future Directions

Despite the promise of integrated approaches, several challenges remain. Cultural and religious differences can complicate the design and implementation of programs that seek to merge educational, dialogical, and spiritual practices. In secular societies like Germany, the marked difference between the high religiosity of refugees and the predominantly secular or different religious norms of the host population can create tensions. Social skepticism, cultural misunderstandings, and the perception that strong religious expression is at odds with integration are real challenges that need to be addressed. Furthermore, resource constraints—such as limited funding and a shortage of trained professionals—can hamper the scalability of these initiatives. Structural and Systemic barriers continue to undermine the well-being of refugees and migrants. Addressing these challenges requires sustained commitment from policymakers, educators, religious leaders, and community organisers. Collaboration between non-governmental organizations and faith-based groups is also critical to developing culturally adaptive models that can be implemented across diverse contexts.

Future research should continue to explore the intersections of education, dialogue, and religion, providing empirical evidence to support innovative practices. More studies are needed to understand how spiritual coping mechanisms can be effectively integrated into secular support structures without alienating either refugees or host communities. Ultimately, fostering intercultural dialogue that respects both spiritual and secular values will be key to building a more inclusive European society.

Conclusion

The experiences of refugees and migrants in Europe are characterised by profound trauma, loss, and resilience. As displaced individuals confront the disintegration of their former lives and daunting integration challenges, education, dialogue, and religion provide essential avenues for healing and empowerment. Inclusive spaces—whether classrooms, community centres, or spiritual havens—can help reconstruct fractured identities and foster a sense of belonging across cultural divides. This article examines how trauma-informed education equips refugees with vital skills, while intercultural dialogue forges connections between diverse communities, and religious as well as spiritual practices serve as lifelines of hope and resilience. It also highlights challenges in secular contexts, such as Germany, where greater religiosity among refugees may encounter scepticism and cultural tension. By integrating these approaches, holistic care models can address immediate physical and psychological needs while nurturing deeper dimensions of identity and spirit. Ultimately, empowering refugees through these transformative strategies can reshape Europe into a more inclusive and compassionate society

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33.   Caroline Garland, Francesca Hume, and Sarah Majid, 'Remaking connections: refugees and the development of "emotional capital" in therapy groups', in *Therapeutic Care for Refugees: No Place Like Home*, Tavistock Clinic Series ed. by Renos Papadopoulos (London: Karnac, 2002), pp. 71 -5.

34.   Caroline Garland, Francesca Hume, and Sarah Majid, 'Remaking connections: refugees and the development of "emotional capital" in therapy groups', in *Therapeutic Care for Refugees: No Place Like Home*, Tavistock Clinic Series ed. by Renos Papadopoulos (London: Karnac, 2002), pp. 71 -5.

Artistic activism to reshape our democracy by and for youth

Maxime Ollivier

The theater play performed in Quimper
©Tanguy Descamps

A tale of artistic trip for democracy

And every time the last scene begins, I'm freaking out, thinking "Will it take?", "Will people stay for the rest?": the mayor steps forward, announcing the opening of the public meeting to listen to citizens about the construction of this infamous shopping zone on the outskirts of the little village. The actors are seated in the audience. They take the audience along with them, defending the points of view of the inhabitants: the environmental activist, the trade unionist, the farmer, the property developer, and then the young heroine, the baker who realizes the limits of representative democracy - no spoiler here : you have to see the play to find out whether this shopping center is being built or not.

        At the end of the play, the audience is delighted. Twist in the plot : I turn to the audience and say, "Now it's your turn to speak". At this point, we put on our activist hats, and we have a number of accomplices in the audience, all trained to lead collective intelligence sessions. **We divide the audience into small groups to ensure a better distribution of the floor and allow everyone, even the youngest or shyest, to express themselves**. We take people by surprise... But we've got it all worked out, and it works!

        We ask them how they feel after the play, what emotions they feel, if they recognize themselves in a character, if this struggle echoes a situation they may be experiencing in their own city... We humbly try to create spaces to go beyond the

Assembly after the play in Plorec-Sur-Arguenon
© Tanguy Descamps

spectator posture in which both theater and representative democracy place us. We're trying it out here, on this public square in front of the town's theater - and not inside, on purpose to reach out to a broader audience - with our wooden agora built for the occasion, which we move from town to town.

        At the end of the exchange, we gathered everyone in a very large circle in the square, the largest we've done on the whole tour I think... unless it's in Rennes? "Can you tell

us how you feel after this experience?" I ask. "Enthusiastic, happy, motivated, invigorated, full of joy, empowered,...". The words follow one another and we end up all shouting together in the same voice, just before the DJ of the evening starts the music. And the party's on.

Robin, stage director and DJ ; Plorec-Sur-Arguenon
© Tanguy Descamps

Inside the disco-voting booth © Laure Cullier

Inside the disco-voting booth © Laure Cullier

Artivism as a solution to the distance between young people and democracy

At Le Bruit Qui Court, the artivist collective I co-founded, we're convinced that emotions are a vector for change. Young people are aware of the democratic situation in France, the record abstention rate, the lack of representativeness, the polarization of debate, the rise of the far right, and corruption. They know it all. **So to give them hope, to show them that we can overcome our collective powerlessness, art is our tool**. Combining theater, democracy and celebration to mobilize young people - that's the challenge! We call it artivism, a way of acting on the ridge between art and activism.

To recreate the link between young people and democracy, it seems important to me not to delegitimize ways of expressing oneself other than voting. In this respect, activism in the form of petitions, rallies, demonstrations or posters should be considered as much as voting as a way of expressing oneself. Young people have ideas and opinions. They don't express it at the ballot box because they don't feel represented, or because the way politicians address them is not the right way. But we participate in another way.

Furthermore, if the intention is to increase young people's participation in institutionalized democratic spaces, we can work to recreate the link between young people, voting and representative democracy: members of the Le Bruit Qui Court collective built a "disco-voting booth" for the last Euro-

Theater play performed in Quimper © Tanguy Descamps

pean elections. The first obstacle to not voting is not knowing where your polling station is, and not anticipating the moment. Deploying this "disco-voting booth" in universities and in parties, and getting young people in to choose the next music to be played, is already a way of bringing young people closer to the ballot box and making sure that the idea of going out to vote is no longer something completely foreign to them.

But in fact, we are taking a more radical view - one that gets to the root of the problems and doesn't just try to

deal with the consequences. We're trying to get to the root of the dysfunction in our democratic system. The polarisation of society, amplified by the media and social networks, tends to give more weight to the most extreme opinions and to their confrontation. The national conversation is becoming a battleground. Paradoxically, while the media and social networks offer greater opportunities for encounters with otherness, the ability to disseminate messages and access information, the algorithms above all encourage filter bubbles and confirmation bias. Over and above the polarisation of public debate, the growing abstention rate bears witness to the population's disinterest not in politics as we would have them believe, but in politics as it is practised today. The democratic crisis is a crisis of the forms of democracy.

The new forms of participatory and deliberative democracy are a response to the crisis of representative democracy. At the very least, they can complement it. And I don't mean deliberative democracy, which only takes the form of institutionalised forums. I believe it is important to revive grassroots activism with a direct impact, as popular education has been doing for many years, and which is a useful tool for developing a culture of participatory and deliberative democracy. Creating spaces for healthy exchange and debate, which may be confrontational but in which disagreement is fruitful, is part of the solution to the current democratic crisis. Enabling young people to move beyond the filter bubbles of social networks and the idea that democracy comes down to voting. We need to increase the number of forms for participation and deliberation in order to change the culture of democracy, and continue to advocate that as many of these forums as possible should be linked to decision-making forms, so as not to create yet another consultation where people have the feeling that their opinions are being taken and then something else is decided!

How can we create such spaces by and for young people ?

To raise awareness of fundamental issues, mobilise new types of audience and re-politicise a section of the population, particularly young people, we need innovative grassroots mobilisation events. To meet all these challenges, Le Bruit Qui Court experimented with artistic and political events during a summer cycling tour of Brittany. As far as possible, each of the events was preceded by a period of mobilisation towards the youth of the city in order to inform them of the event, and was followed by a period of training and workshops on democracy. Here's how one of our events worked in practice:

- Using emotions to generate commitment: the play tells an accessible and popular story, with characters that young people can identify with. The play makes an explicit

link between events directly linked to political issues and their daily and intimate consequences.

- Show off collective intelligence practices: the second moment blends into the play, it is a democratic space that takes the form of a popular assembly at the end of the play. Using collective intelligence practices, the aim is to provide an opportunity for people to exchange ideas and discover deliberative democracy, and to revitalise democracy at a local level. The aim is to fight the feeling of powerlessness by demonstrating that it is possible to do things differently together, to listen to each other and to have healthy debates. In short, democracy!

- Festivities as a way of combining democracy with a joyful experience: each event closes with a festive evening to spread a culture of engagement in which celebration and joy are paramount. Dance is a way of breaking down the last barriers between individuals and feeling part of a community, despite disagreements.

Theatre play in Concarneau ©Tanguy Descamps


Assembly in Quimper ©Tanguy Descamps

Party at Locoal-Mendon ©Tanguy Descamps

Creating new democratic visions

Organising such an event in the public space, paying attention to the scenography, with a beautiful wooden agora, paying attention to the accessibility of the space for all, associating these spaces of participative and deliberative democracy with conviviality, music and festivities, means changing the imaginary of democracy. It means ensuring that when the word 'democracy' is mentioned, it is images other than institutionalised spaces and large inaccessible buildings full of elected representatives in suits and ties that take root in the minds of young people, other spaces, other times, other forms of organisation, in which we can project ourselves.

It's time to move beyond Churchill's old adage, quoted in the introduction to every student paper. Democracy - and we still have to define it - is a system that needs to be rethought before we can assume that it is "the least bad of all systems". Democracy, if you like, is still in its infancy. Read that sentence again. Believe in it and embark on the great adventure of a true democratic revolt. **Art, collective intelligence and joy are the keys that we, as young people, can mobilise to overcome the ageing representative democracy that does not represent us.**
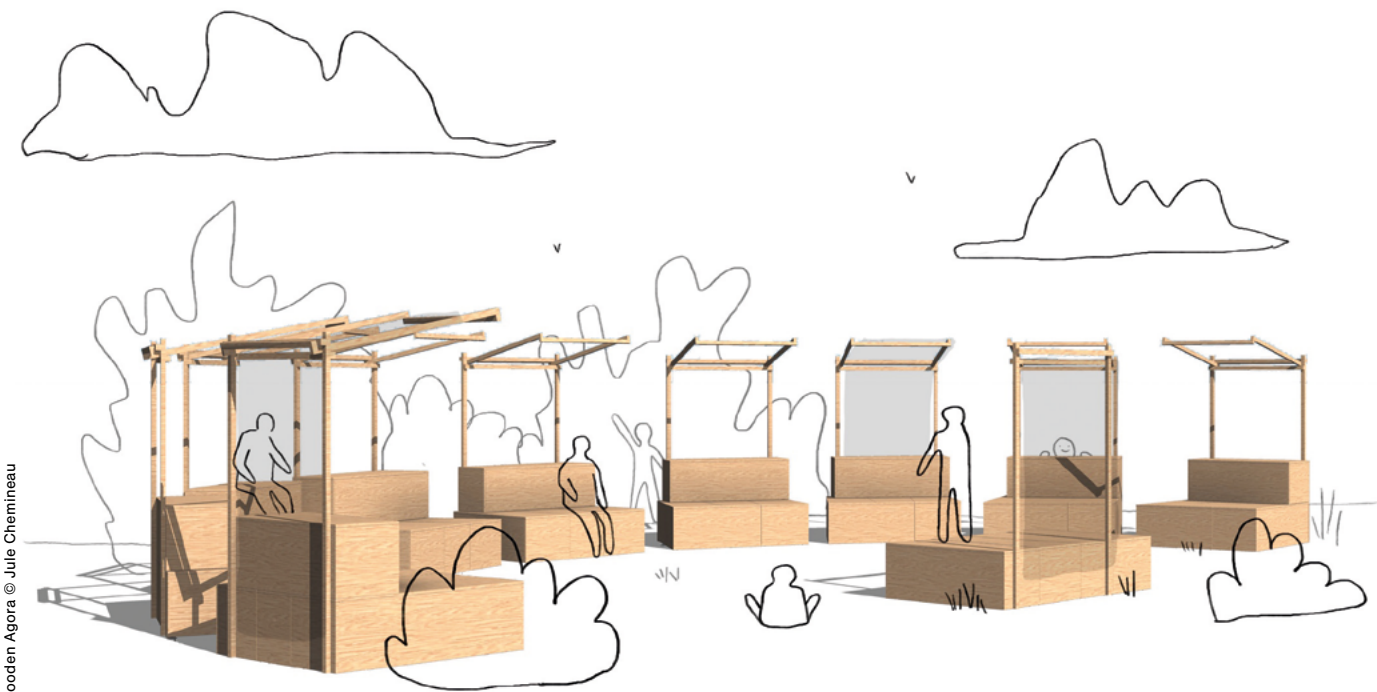
Sketch of the Wooden Agora © Jule Chemineau

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From Monreale (Sicily), a model for reconnecting Youth and Institutions

Sofia Rosano, Ilaria Cascino

When it comes to youth and politics, a complex relationship emerges. Frantz Fanon said that every generation has a historical mission[1], and youth have never shied away from theirs - they protest, propose, and envision a different world.

Yet, according to a recent study by the Osservatorio Giovani[2], most young people feel excluded from politics, which they see as distant, self-referential, and unable to address today's urgent issues. This is compounded by a paternalistic narrative that labels youth as "lazy" or "disinterested." A former Italian Minister of Economy once dismissed youth unemployment by calling young people too "choosy".[3]

The paradox is evident: while youth are accused of disengagement, politics does little to involve them. Power remains concentrated in older generations - Italy's current leadership has an average age of over 50[4].

So, how do we mend this gap? Should young people push forward with energy and patience, or should institutions make the first move by truly listening?

A possible answer lies in southern Italy, particularly Sicily - an island often seen as deeply disillusioned with politics. Here, distrust in institutions is widespread, and historically, the state's presence has often been weak or ineffective[5].

However, Youth Councils (Consulte Giovanili) offer a way to reconnect young people with governance. These bodies, established within local administrations, aim to engage youth in policymaking and provide concrete tools for civic participation. They can act as a bridge between new generations and local institutions, enabling young people to take an active role in public life and fostering a more inclusive democracy.

The island of those who stay

Sicily is the land of sun, sea, art, and culture - or at least, that's what the *clichés* say. But it is also one of the most economically depressed regions in Europe, ranking among the lowest in all well-being indices, with widespread youth distress caused by poverty, chronic unemployment, low literacy and education rates, and no concrete vision for the future.

No need for statistics or reports to notice it: a walk through its crumbling streets, a glance at its deteriorating infrastructure (including the failing water system behind the recent water crisis[6]), or an attempt to access its minimal public services - from healthcare to transport - is enough. For those who live here, the feeling is of inhabiting a land that seems hostile to its own people.

1. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Grove Press, 2004, p. 145.

2. Alessandro Rosina et al., *Giovani, democrazia e partecipazione politica*, Osservatorio Giovani - Istituto Toniolo, 2024, p. 6.

3. Rassegna.it, *Fornero ai giovani: non siate troppo "choosy"*, Collettiva, 2012.

4. Redazione, *Non è un parlamento per giovani*, Fondazione Openpolis, 2022.

5. The 2024 edition of the EU Regional Social Progress Index 2.0, produced by the European Commission, shows that trust in governance in Sicily is around 69.7, significantly lower than the EU average of 100.

6. Lorenzo Tondo, 'The water war': how drought threatens survival of Sicily's towns, The Guardian, 2024.

Saverio Terruso, A Monreale, 1993. The painting depicts a scene from the iconic "Festa del SS. Crocifisso" with devout women in procession, but it can also symbolize the pilgrimage of Sicilians leaving the island.
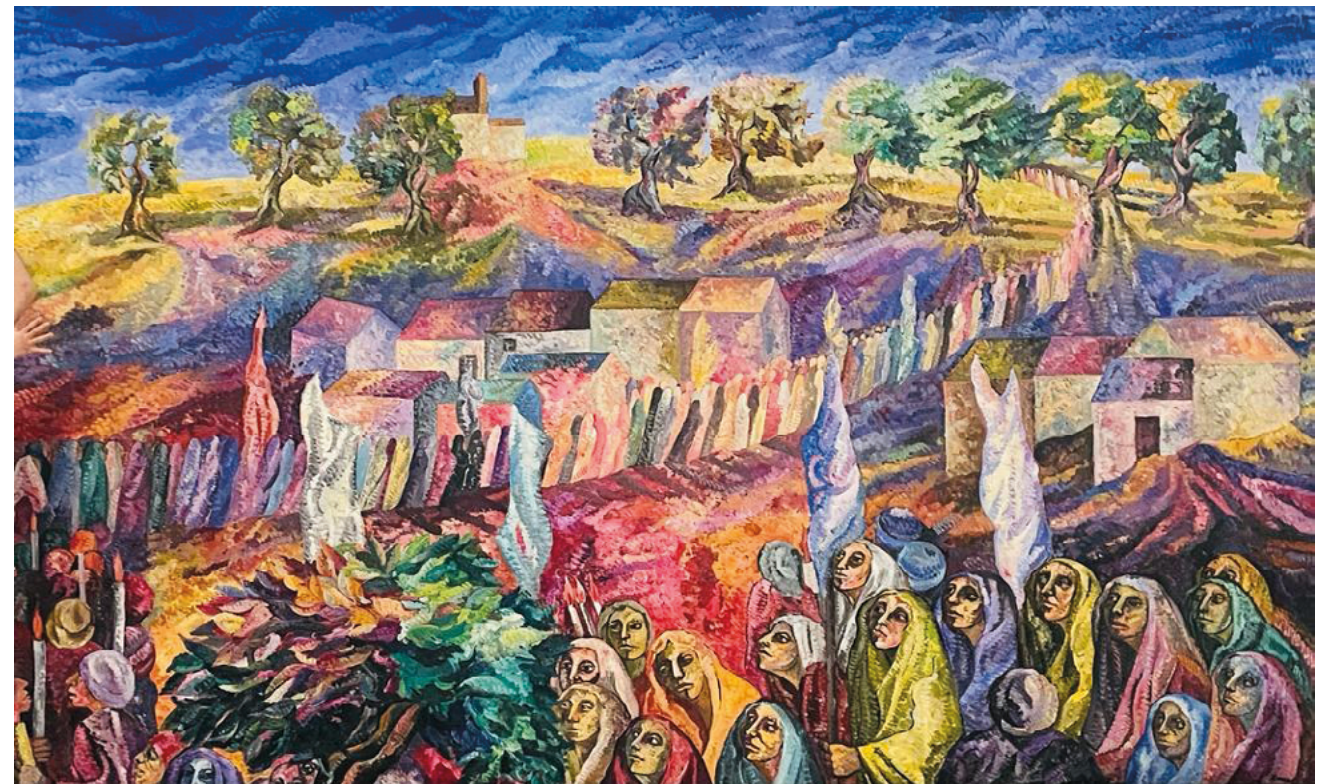
And who feels this hostility more than young people? Without real opportunities or the chance to envision a dignified future in their homeland, emigration becomes the only option. Some estimates speak of nearly 50,000 young people leaving each year[7] - not out of choice or wanderlust, but out of silent necessity. Thousands of young men and women, unable to build a future in their own region, cross the Strait of Messina with a one-way ticket[8]. A tragic phenomenon that begins early, with many Sicilians leaving right after high school to pursue university education that offers better job prospects[9].

The result is devastating: a region that ages, empties, and risks becoming increasingly marginalized.

Yet, alongside the many who leave, there are those determined to stay - or return - and bet on their homeland[10]. Despite the sacrifices and difficulties, some young people choose to remain and build a future where few have ever truly believed in one. But how can they make their voices heard within local institutions without facing the same disappointment?

In recent years, Sicily has seen a true boom in Youth Councils. More and more municipalities are establishing them, with at least 123 councils currently active out of 391 Sicilian municipalities[11]. In some cases, they have even formed territorial networks, such as the *Consulte Madonite*, which recently united into a single youth-led project for the future of Sicily's inland mountain areas. The phenomenon became so significant that, in 2019, the Sicilian Regional Government took notice, attempting to create a regional youth council to bring local demands directly to the Sicilian Parliament - a project that ultimately failed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

At the heart of this movement is the recognition, even by institutions, that giving young people space is essential to prevent further depopulation. However, there is a lingering risk that these councils remain empty shells - mere tokens of old politics designed to give youth the illusion of influence without granting them real decision-making power. The key lies in the dialogue between young people and institutions, in filling these spaces with genuine participation, rooted in the belief that youth can be a true force for change in society.

7.   Redazione, *Sicilia seconda regione per emigrazione giovanile: ogni anno 50.000 giovani lasciano l'Isola*, La Sicilia, 2024.

8.   Redazione, *La Sicilia Più di 800 mila siciliani sono andati (e vivono) all'estero: i dati del rapporto Migrantes*, La Sicilia, 2024.

9.   Daniela Ciralli, *Giovani: tra emigrazione e voglia di restare (o di tornare). Indagine della Cgil Sicilia*, Collettiva, 2024.

10.   Marta Occhipinti, *I giovani che dicono no alla 'fuga dall'Isola: "Facciamo rete contro lo spopolamento"*, La Repubblica Palermo, 2024.

11.   Calculation made by the Youth Council of Monreale based on the Instagram pages of youth councils active in 2024. An updated register of Sicilian Youth Councils is not currently available.

Building youth communities: the case of Monreale

The example we want to share takes place in Monreale, a town overlooking Palermo, and traces a path of growth that can be traced back to the 1970s - when, on a narrow staircase in a working-class neighbourhood, a woman decided to open her home to the world. Since then, the youth of this town have no longer been just an age group but an active force in society, embarking on a journey whose fruits can be seen today (though certainly not only) in their institutional legitimacy through an important tool: the Youth Council.

That woman was Sarina Ingrassia (1923 - 2015), a pioneer of social activism in Monreale. Founder and soul of the association *Il Quartiere*, Sarina began working in the Bavera district in 1975, foreseeing the importance of grassroots mutual support. From the very beginning, active participation and cooperation proved to be the best means of bridging the gap between citizens and politics and achieving social justice.

For over forty years, Sarina welcomed into her home anyone affected by poverty in any form, without judgment - only out of dedication. In her diary, she wrote: «*Since my youth, I have found the purpose of my life in 'meddling' with the needs of others, and in order to belong to everyone, I decided not to belong to anyone. [...] Around my personal choice, others have joined in this service, and above all, different generations of young people have alternated over time. Today, as they continue their journey, they find themselves holding responsibilities for the community*»[12].

Sarina Ingrassia's 80th birthday. Even celebrations became a reason for gathering and sharing in the Bavera district, alongside neighbors and loved ones.

2018, members of Il Quartiere association and Arci Link collective in front of the mural of Sarina Ingrassia, painted by artist Nino Carlotta in the Bavera district. During the "Letture Erranti" event, volunteers engaged Monreale's residents through readings and folk songs.

Above all, she built a network of young people from diverse backgrounds who became the foundation of the project she envisioned. In her home, they helped organize activities - supporting children facing educational and cultural hardships, families in socio-economic distress, single mothers, and people struggling with addiction. They learned, reflected on the complexities of their social reality, and approached volunteering as «*the highest form of politics*»[13].

The relationship between volunteering and institutions was one of frankness: institutions were fundamental and necessary to combat economic and cultural poverty, but they often became the target of urgent appeals to do more, stepping in where associations found themselves alone.

A decade after her passing, Sarina remains a model for those who have inherited her legacy, her vision of volunteering, and her approach to politics. As Émile Durkheim suggested, the actions of the young people who open their doors daily demonstrate how society continually regenerates its cohesion[14] - almost as if it were a generational necessity, activating all the resources needed to reduce vulnerability and prevent exclusion.

Though in a different form, the values passed down by *Il Quartiere* and Sarina have shaped Monreale's associative fabric, leading to the rise of new initiatives over the years. The community has been revitalized by young people who have carried this legacy forward for more than four decades.

Among the most significant examples is the emergence of grassroots collectives and committees, formed spontaneously as an expression of youth and territorial self-determination.

One such example is the *Arci Link* collective, which, between 2017 and the COVID-19 pandemic, managed to open a youth center in the area. They organized events like the temporary occupation of abandoned soccer fields, transforming them into spaces for artistic and musical performances to demand their reopening. They also carried out other initiatives to highlight the need for dialogue with associations and local institutions[15]. Another is *Comitato Pioppo Comune*, which

12.   Sarina Ingrassia, *Diario senza data*, Istituto Poligrafico Europeo, 2018, p.5.

13.   Redazione, *Sarina Ingrassia: "La più alta forma di volontariato è la politica"*, Filodiretto Monreale, 2015.

14.   Paolo Fagliozzo, *Coesione Sociale, in Aggiornamenti sociali*, n. 1/65, 2012.

15.   Redazione, *ARCI LINK: "Collaborazione con l'attuale sindaco? Cercata ma mai ottenuta"*, Filodiretto Monreale, 2019.

has become a cornerstone of social activism in the Pioppo district, working on urban regeneration, environmental protection, advocating for the reopening of a local school, and opposing the construction of a private cemetery in a crucial environmental area[16].

The world of associations remains a home for those who recognize and wish to explore their potential, who are aware of their role within their community, and who choose to take a stand for themselves and others. Intergenerational exchange and the promotion of critical thinking enhance participation as a shared responsibility.

Through this process, horizontal and community-driven practices lay the groundwork for strong alliances. The enthusiasm for collaboration with socio-cultural organizations, combined with a willingness to build networks with local third-sector entities, public and private institutions, schools, political bodies, and the Church, helps restore services that address the specific needs and aspirations of today's youth.

Just as inspiring—though often marked by tension - is the relationship between these grassroots movements and local institutions. While young activists continuously push for action and engagement, institutions are not always willing or able to listen. Yet, it is precisely within this dynamic of confrontation and dialogue that the most meaningful change can emerge.

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16. Alessia Rotolo, *Grazie al Comitato Pioppo Comune la piccola frazioni di Monreale è più viva che mai*, Italia che cambia, 2024.

17. *Statuto Arci Nazionale*.

Youth Councils as a ground for reconciliation

Thanks to the spirit that Sarina instilled in young people long ago, today in Monreale, they benefit from an accessible, active institutional framework that is open to the exchange of project proposals. This current situation did not materialize by a stroke of fate but is rather a first milestone, the result of a participatory process and dialogue with the Department of Youth Policies and the public administration. This has led to the recognition of social commitment and activism through the establishment of the Youth Council.

This step finally marks an initial opening towards younger citizens and greater collaboration in gathering resources and tools useful for the development of their aspirations.

Established in 2023, the Monreale Youth Council is designed from its very regulations[18] as an inclusive space: open to all residents under the age of 30 without requiring any "endorsement" from third parties, it includes young people from different areas of the municipality (one of the largest in Italy!). It also grants automatic membership to student representatives, acknowledging their right and duty to be part of the administrative system. Furthermore, it has the possibility of having its own budget, allowing members to allocate funds for events and initiatives at their discretion.

The council's assemblies take place in the Council Chamber, where the municipal council meets. This setting offers both the privilege and the responsibility of sitting among the benches of the institutions representing the territory. These meetings serve not only as opportunities for dialogue among young people, council members, and anyone interested in participating but also as moments of direct engagement with local institutions. The Youth Policy Councillor attends these meetings, proposing initiatives and responding to the council's inquiries.

Since its inception a year and a half ago, the Youth Council has carried out initiatives that address the needs and proposals of its young members in various forms: theatrical performances, musical events, nature excursions, book presentations, and solidarity initiatives. The council has participated in regional projects and calls for funding, promoted voter participation in the European elections, and organized career and university orientation programs[19].

Recently, a study group on Danilo Dolci was also established, remembering this key figure in Sicilian history and his pedagogical influence, which is acknowledged in this edition of the *Journal of European Alternatives*. Other initiatives have been aimed directly at the local administration: through the project "*Monreale is not a town for young people*", feedback was collected from high school students on what they believe is missing for young people in the city. The campaign "*389 good reasons to increase AMAT bus routes*" proposed an expansion of the local public transportation service. Additionally, by leveraging a municipal project for libraries, a public call was launched to involve citizens in the participatory purchase of books.

A key tool in engaging with young people and the broader community has been the strategic use of social media (IG: @consultagiovanilemonreale; FB: Consulta Giovanile di Monreale). Through videos, content creation, and regular updates, the Youth Council amplifies its voice and ensures that assemblies and initiatives receive maximum visibility. Social platforms serve as a bridge between young people and institutions, fostering greater participation and making sure that local issues are heard loud and clear. Every assembly is advertised online, ensuring transparency and accessibility.

Moreover, the Youth Council actively collaborates with numerous local organizations, cultural associations, the Pro Loco, and other youth councils across Sicily, fostering networks and reflecting on new possibilities for action.

So, are Youth Councils truly the right ground for reconciliation between young people and institutions? It depends. It depends on young people's ability to legitimize themselves, to engage in dialogue, and to enter unfamiliar and diverse spaces. It depends on institutions' willingness to make room, to be honest, and to embrace change. The tool itself, like a needle, helps to stitch a tear: but it is up to our skills as tailors to sew the two sides together into unity.

We, the authors of this article, have experienced this journey firsthand. From the welcoming space of Sarina's home to the council chamber benches, we have lived through the process that led to the establishment of the Monreale Youth Council. As President and Vice President of this institution, we have seen how grassroots engagement can turn into institutional recognition. It is precisely because of this experience that we have chosen to tell this story—to show that change is possible, and that young people, when given the right tools, can shape the future of their communities.

2024, event "Monreale is not a town for young people" curated by the Youth Council of Monreale. During the initiative, high school students had the opportunity to discuss the city's shortcomings and their desires for its future.

18. Municipality of Monreale (Metropolitan City of Palermo), *Nuovo Regolamento della Consulta Giovanile del Comune di Monreale*, approved by council resolution no. 37 of 05/08/2023.

19. Redazione, *Un anno di Consulta Giovanile di Monreale: "Ecco cosa abbiamo realizzato"*, Monrealepress, 2024.

20. Redazione, *Danilo Dolci il Gandhi siciliano, a Monreale il ricordo al Santa Caterina*, MonrealeLive, 2025.

Mompracem: A Solidarity Island in the Heart of Rome

CSOA La Strada

In a world where grassroots initiatives often bear the burden of filling the gaps left by failing institutional responses, the experience of Mompracem l'Isola Solidale in Rome's Garbatella district stands as a testament to the power of community-led mutualism. What began as an emergency response to the COVID-19 crisis has evolved into a transformative social infrastructure, proving that radical participation and mutual aid can reimagine local welfare beyond crisis management.

From emergency to empowerment: the birth of Mompracem

The COVID-19 pandemic laid bare the fragility of institutional welfare systems across the world. In Rome, the Eighth Municipality coordinated a solidarity network, "Municipio Solidale," to provide essential food aid to over 600 families and 2,000 individuals, mobilizing more than 300 volunteers. The network sourced food through the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD), supermarket collections, and citizen donations. However, as the pandemic emergency subsided in November 2021, the structural inequalities it exacerbated did not disappear. Recognizing the need for a long-term solution two different grassroot organizations, the occupied social center "CSOA La Strada" and the community space "La Villetta Social Lab", joined forces to transform the emergency response into a sustainable solidarity initiative.

"CSOA La Strada" it is a self-managed space with a long history of activism, having been occupied in 1994. It embodies a model of horizontal organization, where decision-making is collective, and every voice matters. Over the past three decades, hundreds of individuals have passed through its doors, contributing to its organization and shaping its political and social vision. Today, it is animated by a collective of under-30 volunteers, who carry forward its legacy while infusing it with new energy and perspectives. These young activists engage in daily struggles against speculation and institutional neglect, ensuring that La Strada remains a hub for direct democracy, mutual aid, and cultural resistance. The social center has long been a reference point for grassroots struggles, hosting political assemblies, cultural events, mutuality projects and educational workshops. By facilitating projects like Mompracem, La Strada proves that youth-led, community-driven initiatives are not just viable but essential for reimagining urban spaces as sites of radical transformation. "La Villetta Social Lab", founded in 2015, was created as an incubator for mutualism, participation and sharing projects aimed at the local community and beyond. It specialises in social and cultural animation, operating as a laboratory of

ideas and practices to organise projects aimed at improving the quality of life for residents. Through training courses at affordable prices, support desks on social issues and free activities, Villetta Social Lab promotes culture, good sociability, quality human relations and lifestyles, the practice of rights and participation.

This marked the birth of Mompracem l'Isola Solidale, a social market that upholds dignity, agency, and community-building. Mompracem does not claim to "fix" poverty through temporary relief but rather aims to challenge the systems that produce marginalization, fostering a collective capacity for resistance and transformation. The goal of this project is not simply "to help the needy", but to actively dismantle the logic of dependency and paternalism that too often defines charitable interventions, replacing them with principles of autonomy, reciprocity, and self-governance. By pooling their networks, skills, and community ties, La Villetta and CSOA La Strada co-manage Mompracem: a collaboration that not only has strengthened the initiative but has also allowed for the integration of wider mutual aid networks, food recovery programs and participatory decision-making processes.

A Hub for Social Change

Mompracem has grown far beyond its initial mission of food distribution. It has become a safe space that fosters human connections and fights social isolation, a critical but often overlooked aspect of poverty. It does not simply offer a transactional service: it aims to build relationships of solidarity that outlast temporary need.

Some of its key impacts include:

- Over 70 families supported on a monthly basis, amounting to a provision of 100+ euros per family in food value.

- More than 7 tons of food are distributed per year.

- Support for local Renewable Energy Communities, enabling 7 families to access alternative energy sources.

- The successful transition of 15+ families out of the program as they regained financial stability, not as isolated "success stories," but as part of a broader process of collective empowerment that represent the main goal of the project.

From Mompracem to Fermenti: Institutionalizing Grassroots Solidarity

The transformative impact of Mompracem has not remained isolated, neither in the city, where a number of similar experiments have emerged, nor in the Municipality VIII. In fact, in November 2023, the Civic Pole of Rome's Municipality VIII, known as 'Fermenti', was established as an initiative that was built upon the collaborative model experimented by Mompracem, extending it to other realities within the network. Fermenti integrates the Social Market, a cornerstone of Mompracem's activities, with a Social Desk dedicated to monitoring social distress and with participatory workshops enabling citizens to design and implement solutions related to access to food and sustainability. Thanks to their joint community approach, Mompracem and Fermenti collaborate fruitfully, bringing together institutions and voluntary associations in this network to co-create a more inclusive social fabric and ensuring that the community-driven approach continues to thrive within a broader institutional framework.

A Model for Radical Participation

In a time when traditional democratic institutions are often struggling to engage young people and provide meaningful avenues for participation, this experience offers an alternative vision: it exemplifies how youth-led, community-driven initiatives can reclaim agency, not just through protest but by actively building an alternative. This is democracy beyond elections, an ongoing process of negotiation, self-organization, and direct action.

The experience of Mompracem is a reminder that grassroots democracy is not an abstract ideal but a lived reality, built through everyday acts of solidarity, collective care, and mutual empowerment. It embodies the radical act of imagining and enacting new possibilities for economic justice and social participation. In the words of Danilo Dolci, "One only grows if dreamt.", in Garbatella the dream of a just, inclusive, and self-sustaining community is already taking shape.

Voices of Change: Taiwanese Youth Driving Democracy in the Digital Age

Fang-Hua Chang

Taiwan's democratization process is nothing short of remarkable. Yet, despite its success, young people still feel sidelined by traditional political structures. The Sunflower Movement in 2013-2014 was a wake-up call, and led to new initiatives for digital democracy: platforms like g0v's Cofacts and vTaiwan are giving young people the tools to reshape politics, fight misinformation, and demand more transparency. These innovative movements are proving that the future of democracy doesn't just belong to politicians—it belongs to the people, especially the youth. Taiwan's story is a roadmap for a new democracy, and the world is watching.

Democracy in Taiwan: Evolution and Youth Participation

Taiwan's democratic journey is an extraordinary one, especially after the lifting of martial law in 1987 (Chen, 1998)[1]. This transformation from a tightly controlled authoritarian regime to a vibrant democracy reached a milestone with Taiwan's first direct presidential election in 1996. Its political environment nowadays reflects the aspirations of its people, in sharp contrast to its earlier, more authoritarian regime. Today, Taiwan is widely recognised for its rule of law, robust electoral system, and commitment to democratic values among its citizens.

Despite these achievements, challenges remain, particularly regarding civil liberties and the growing involvement of the younger generation in politics (Templeman, 2022, p.26)[2]. Traditional political structures still tend to marginalise younger or disadvantaged voices, deeming them as inexperienced or too disconnected from the "real-world" needs of governance. This has left many young people disillusioned, feeling that the political process no longer addresses their democratic aspirations or concerns.

This frustration was particularly evident during Taiwan's Sunflower Movement in 2013-2014, when students and young activists protested against the ruling Kuomintang (KMT) party over an opaque trade agreement with China. Many felt that the agreement undermined Taiwan's sovereignty and democratic accountability. In their call for greater transparency and participation, the movement brought to light the growing dissatisfaction among young people with traditional governance. What followed was the emergence of new ways for youth to engage—particularly through digital platforms that allowed them to voice their opinions and influence decisions in ways that were previously not possible.

1. Sheue Yun Chen, *State, media and democracy in Taiwan*, Media, Culture & Society, 1998, pp.11-29.

2. Kharis Templeman, *How democratic is Taiwan? Evaluating twenty years of political change*, Taiwan Journal of Democracy, 2002, p.22.

Digital Democracy:
Youth-Driven Initiatives in Taiwan

In response to the growing dissatisfaction about traditional political structures, Taiwanese youth have begun to reshape the landscape of political engagement. Among the most significant is the **g0v movement**, an open-source community that was established in 2012. This platform aims to bridge the gap between the government and the public that promotes transparency and civic engagement. One standout project from g0v is **Cofacts**, a collaborative fact-checking chatbot that fights back against disinformation. What makes Cofacts so special is that it's not just a tool for fact-checking—it's an entire community effort. Cofacts operates on an open-source model, allowing users to flag suspicious information, contribute to the fact-checking process, and provide feedback on verified content. Regular people can get involved by flagging fake news, verifying facts, and offering real-time corrections to misinformation as it spreads. It's a way to put the power back in the hands of the people. This decentralised approach shifts the power who are able to gatekeeper information (traditional authority figures) to everyday citizens equipped with digital tools and knowledge. With Cofacts, young Taiwanese are not just passive consumers of information—they are active participants in shaping the political conversation. It's like a digital democracy in action, where everyone has the tools to stand up for the truth.
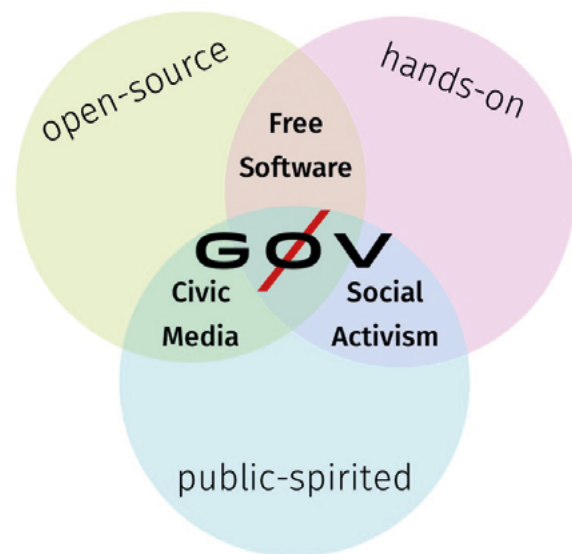
That's where Cofacts offers a valuable lesson for the world. In Taiwan, the fact-checking process is a shared responsibility that isn't just in the hands of politicians or media tycoons. Instead, it's in the hands of everyday citizens. By building a decentralised, open-source tool that allows anyone to participate, Cofacts empowers individuals to fight back against the tide of fake news. Cofacts also offers an alternative to the "top-down" approach to information that many European countries rely on. In many places, the traditional media or government-led fact-checking institutions control what's considered "true" or "false." But as we know, this doesn't always build trust. The power of Cofacts lies in its ability to engage communities in real time, allowing regular citizens to actively verify information and share their findings with others.


g0v, From g0v, 2014, https://g0v.us/tw/

Digital democracy:
Give Voice back to the People

Another transformative platform is vTaiwan, an initiative that stemmed from the Sunflower Movement. When Taiwan's youth took to the streets during the Sunflower Movement, demanding greater transparency and participation in government decisions, they weren't just asking for change—they were calling for a new way of doing politics. And from this demand for more inclusive governance, an innovative platform was born: **Taiwan**.

vTaiwan facilitates open and inclusive public deliberation on policy issues. At the heart of vTaiwan is a belief that democracy isn't just about voting once every few years—it's about being able to participate in ongoing political conversations or even policy making decisions. The platform uses
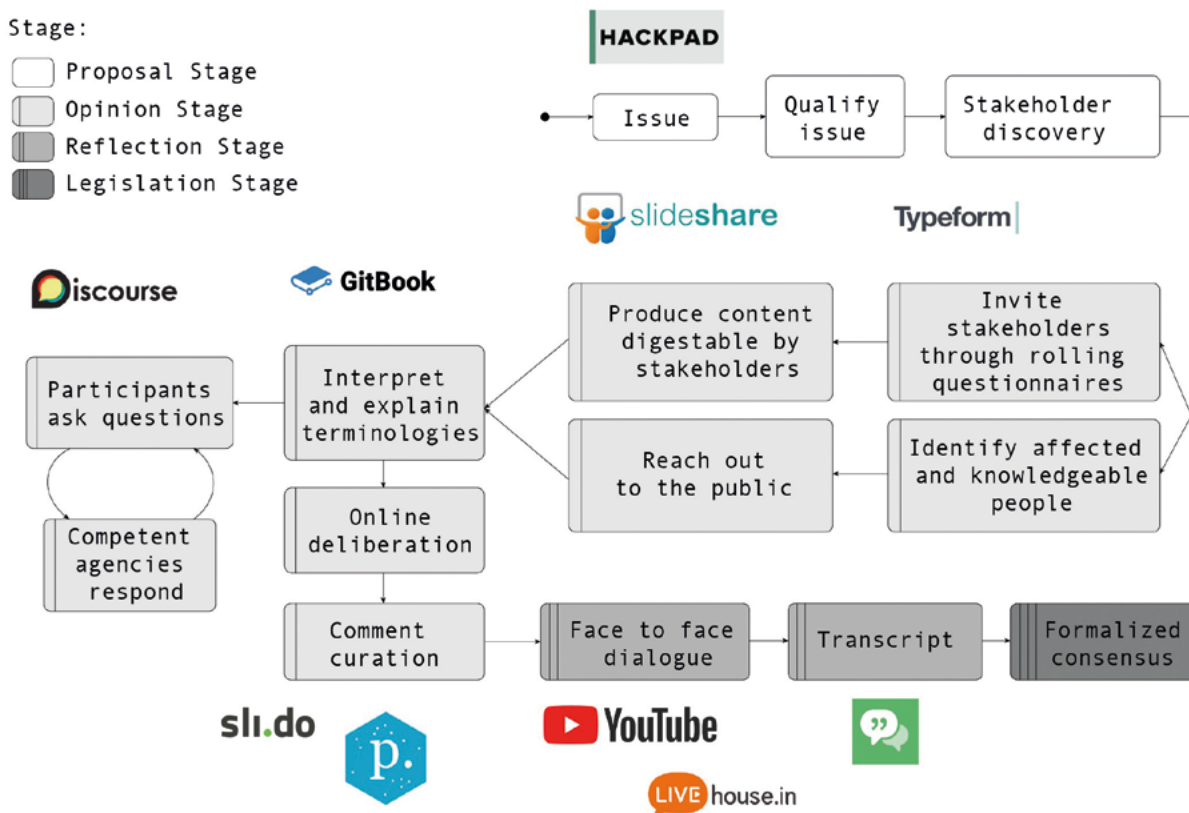
vTaiwan process, From vTaiwan, 2020, https://info.vtaiwan.tw

a tool called Pol.is, which gathers opinions from a broad range of people, analyzes them, and builds consensus. From ride-sharing regulations to online alcohol sales, you name it. The vTaiwan process is built on a four-stage framework—Proposal, Opinion, Reflection, and Legislation—ensuring that public input is systematically incorporated into policy discussions. Weekly hackathons and public consultations further enrich this process, fostering collaboration between citizens, government officials, and experts.

The impact of vTaiwan is undeniable. With over 80% of its proposals implemented into policy, it has proven that digital democracy can be more than just a pipe dream. It's about making governance more inclusive, more transparent, and more collaborative. Instead of waiting for politicians to make all the decisions behind closed doors, vTaiwan opens up the process to everyone. The platform doesn't just collect opinions—it actively ensures that those opinions are heard and acted upon. It makes the policymaking process public and accessible, showing that decisions are based on real input from the people. With growing concerns about the influence of lobbyists, political elites, and corporate interests in the European Union, a platform like vTaiwan could help rebuild trust in the political system. It could create a space where people feel like their concerns and ideas are genuinely taken into account, not just ignored or sidelined. In fact, studies have proved that this open form of online discussion "does not differ from face-to-face discussions in its participatory influence and effectiveness (Gil de Zúñiga et al, 2010, p.37)[3]." It

also fosters greater participation in different societal settings (Gil de Zúñiga et al, 2010, p.46)[4]. vTaiwan proves that digital democracy isn't just a futuristic ideal—it's already happening. And the lessons learned from Taiwan's experience could help the EU reshape its democratic systems to better reflect the needs and voices of its citizens.

3.   Homero Gil de Zúñiga et al, *Digital democracy: Reimagining pathways to political participation*, Journal of information technology & politics, 2010

4.   Homero Gil de Zúñiga et al, *Digital democracy: Reimagining pathways to political participation*, Journal of information technology & politics, 2010

Imagining the Future of Digital Democracy

As we look toward the future, one thing is clear: digital democracy is not just a passing trend; it's the evolution of how we engage with governance. Taiwan has already begun to demonstrate how youth with digital tools can reshape traditional political structures. Whether it's Cofacts fighting misinformation or Taiwan turning policy-making into a collaborative process, Taiwan's innovations hold important lessons for the world.

But what does the future of digital democracy actually look like? One of the most exciting possibilities lies in transnational collaboration. Imagine a world where decisions about the environment are not made by a few elite leaders behind closed doors but are shaped by the contributions of people from all walks of life, all over the globe. Just as vTaiwan brought together people from diverse backgrounds to discuss local policy issues —whether it's climate change, data privacy, or global health issues.

Another key aspect lies in the trust issue. Right now, many citizens feel disconnected from political processes, either because they don't feel their voices are heard or because they don't trust their leaders. Digital platforms can help bridge that gap. But for this to happen, we must work to build trust in the digital democracy itself. This requires transparency—not just in the policymaking process, but in how digital platforms collect and use data. When citizens understand how their voices are being heard and how their data is being handled, they're more likely to engage in the process.

Looking ahead, digital democracy holds incredible potential to transform the way we experience governance. Just as Taiwan's youth have stepped up to lead their own way, all youngsters have the potential to take part in reshaping new democracies. From fighting disinformation to creating more participatory spaces for policy-making, the future is one where people—not just politicians or corporations—have the power to shape their communities and their countries. But to make that future a reality, we must be mindful of the challenges ahead. How do we ensure that these platforms remain truly democratic, serving the people rather than exploiting them? How do we protect against manipulation, surveillance, and abuse of power? These are questions we'll need to answer as we continue to build the future of digital democracy.

One thing is for sure - The future of democracy is digital in the hands of young people, and the opportunities are limitless.

Reclaiming Digital Spaces for a democratic future

A reflection about European Alternatives' online presence and positioning

Marta Cillero, Billie Dibb, Noemi Pittalà

Imagining the Future of Digital Democracy

Over the past decade, our view and position about social media has been that of recognising it as a powerful tool for social change, advocacy and mobilization. We've actively used platforms like Twitter, Facebook or Instagram to raise awareness on global issues like climate change, human rights, gender equality, and racial justice; but also to engage directly with supporters, providing real-time updates, calls to action, and campaigns for fundraising or lobbying and to facilitate global solidarity by connecting activists, organizations, and communities across borders.

Social media has not only transformed how individuals interact but also redefined how political engagement and activism unfold. Movements like Black Lives Matter, Fridays for Future and the Sunflower movement have demonstrated the power of online mobilization in shaping real-world outcomes, and in times of authoritarianism, social media has allowed buried voices to be heard.

While recognizing its ability to amplify marginalized voices, mobilize movements, and advocate for social justice, the largest social media platforms pose increasing risks, including misinformation, privacy violations, amplification of inequalities, and corporate control. These challenges have been exacerbated in recent years, and after the US elections in particular. The rapid spread of false information through unfact-checked posts or AI bots, especially on platforms like Facebook and Twitter, poses harms to public health (e.g., anti-vaccine rhetoric), elections (Cambridge Analytica scandals, apparent Russian interference in Georgia and Romania), and already marginalised people. The monopolistic and for-profit practices of major tech companies like Facebook, Twitter, and Google create further extractive and ethical problems; the environmental impact of data centers and the energy consumption of social media platforms; the exploitation of workers, especially in the global South where many workers are employed in app development or content moderation at extremely low wages; nonconsensually extracting users data and opaquely selling them to third parties, in some cases furthering human rights abuses such as facial recognition software to persecute Uyghur people in China; and the censorship and algorithmic biases, where we directly experience how social medias are quickly censoring content that does not align with the views of the men in charge, including EAs own content, and particularly content from activists in authoritarian contexts. We've reached a point where our main news & communication sources completely oppose the values of democracy.

How can we ensure that digital commons are democratic and aligned with the values of equity and free expression,

what happened to John Perry Barlow's promised social contract of Cyberspace?

For a start, we've decided to review our positioning and use of social media platforms, in order to make sure that, as much as possible, the use we make of them are aligned with our political positioning in regards to big tech, media literacy, the right to information, protection of rights and democracy.

The digital landscape is at a turning point. The major social media are not the utopian tool of communication & transnational connection they once promised to be but a contested space between corporate control, social movements, and institutional regulations.

We need to inhabit other spaces, challenge ourselves, and restart a real dialogue. We cannot simply denounce the toxic dynamics of mainstream platforms without actively seeking alternatives that align with our values, that offer user transparency, and have collective ownership.

We believe that it's time to stand more vocally and actively, to support platforms advocating for greater accountability from tech companies, better regulation, and individual digital rights, and to utilise alternative spaces. In particular, we want to drive our audience to safer spaces where we have more ownership, like our newsletter and website, platforms that also allow us to provide them with better curated content and free of censorship. We are also making a shift towards other types of social media platforms, moving away from X since January 2025 and entering the spaces of Bluesky and TikTok. We are aware that transitioning is difficult, especially from a space like Instagram, which can allow us to reach a wider and more diverse audience. However, we believe it is necessary to take a stand. We hope this move encourages other users to consider platforms that adhere to EU regulations and align with European values, promoting a more democratic and culturally open digital environment.

Challenges and Future Outlook

We actively advocate for the role of social media in fostering democratic engagement. Social media can help citizens participate in political discussions, express dissent, and hold governments accountableHowever, we have to recognize the risks to democracy, such as the rise of authoritarian regimes using social media for surveillance, censorship, or spreading propaganda.

We advocate for regulation of social media platforms to ensure they are not used to undermine democratic processes or human rights. In particular, we call for the creation of clear policies on:

— **Content moderation** to reduce harm (e.g., hate speech, misinformation, and extremism).

— **Algorithm transparency** to ensure that algorithms do not disproportionately amplify harmful or divisive content

— **Youth protection** measures to safeguard users' privacy, data and access to harmful content.

— Recognise and support the rise of **digital activism**, where social media has become an important tool for grassroots campaigns, especially in repressive contexts where physical protests may be too dangerous. Social media helps activists organize, share information, and resist oppressive governments.

— Support **cybersecurity** measures for activists to protect them from digital surveillance and hacking by authoritarian regimes.

Following this road map, by end of-2025 we envision European Alternatives to be:

• Meta-free.

• Using new platforms like Bluesky, Mastodon or Pixel Fed as the platforms for direct political debate and activism.

• Present on TikTok for engaging young people and activists with educational video content.

• Issuing newsletters as the primary communication channel for longer and more in-depth reflections.

• Using LinkedIn for networking, professional opportunities and connections with various organisations.

• Having eliminated X, embracing a decentralized and more ethical communication approach

Further than the platforms we choose and their policies, education must adapt for the digital age. Youth must be empowered to ensure their digital rights and the health of the digital commons, coding is needed to understand the language of the platforms, critical thinking to hinder misinformation, and their voice must be included in the creation and regulation of the spaces they use.

Nothing about us without us: A young activist's vision of how to actually make online spaces safer

Yassine Chagh

As a young activist with marginalised, intersecting identities, I find myself lost and uncertain about where to begin when it comes to staying safe online.

Should I start with the AI technologies that are inherently racist, sexist, and non-inclusive of queer identities by design? The shadow-banning and silencing of young critical voices ? The constant violations of data privacy, the lack of meaningful engagement, or the relentless tokenism of youth participation in online spaces?

In October 2024, Tech and Society Summit, the first civil society-led summit in Brussels, brought our collective digital agenda for the future to policymakers. I joined the event, not just as a passionate activist and human rights advocate, but also as a vulnerable, anxious individual who happens to be a person of colour, a migrant, and queer. There were few of us in the summit, in the sea of heteronormative whiteness that is EU policymaking.

What such a space leads to are policies such as the new EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, through the lens of which we are dangerous potential criminals, subject to invasive biometric data collection, police scrutiny, and intrusive border technologies "to protect the EU". It leads to 'community guidelines' of social media platforms, the enforcement of which sees people like us as a threat to the status-quo when voicing community issues or just sharing our experiences in these platforms — while racist, colonial, homophobic, transphobic, and sexist narratives remain unchecked and unchallenged.

We experience being seen as seemingly out of place, but also as brave and radical changemakers in the rare moments we are given space. And we have to be brave - these issues threaten our digital lifelines, stripping away the spaces where we've fought to express ourselves and *exist*.

And yet, those most affected by these injustices are rarely part of the conversation— our voices are silenced, sto- ries erased, and identities ignored. This exclusion isn't just immediate; it extends beyond the present, deeply embedded in a digital world that continues to marginalise and erase us.

It also isn't surprising, then, that the 'solutions' coming out of exclusionary spaces that don't consider our voices as important do more harm than good.

Digital platforms broken by design

For many young people, especially those with mutiple marginalisations, digital platforms are often the most accessible place for self expression, advocacy and community-building. By silencing our voices in these spaces, it doesn't only discourage participation but also deepens our feelings of isolation and invisibility — mirroring familiar offline experiences where youth voices remain at the back burner of 'grown-up conversations'.

For instance, consider the suppression of certain content or users without their knowledge that often happens in these spaces. This 'shadow-banning' is presented as a 'technical glitch' but is often tied to systemic discrimination or even directly to being labelled as 'content against community guidelines'. Examples include the of silencing pro-Palestini-

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an content by Meta under the guise of 'violating' guidelines. This is symptomatic of the dangerous right-wing climate we find ourselves in, which harbours censorship of marginalised voices.

Discussions around queer rights, race, and other systemic socioeconomic issues are disproportionately affected, reducing the visibility of these crucial conversations. In these instances, digital spaces, meant to provide a platform for young marginalised voices, instead become a tool of control.

The oppressive nature of many digital platforms leaves young people feeling targeted, abused and even violated. Rather than enjoying the spaces these platforms promise and market, we are forced to become resilient and battle systemic issues that these platforms are not addressing in their design.

What is actually 'unsafe' for young people in online spaces?

It's not 'age-inappropriate' or sexually explicit content that makes online spaces unsafe for us. What *really* endangers our self-expression online are frequent digital attacks – often driven by misogyny, racism, queerphobia led by alt and far-right groups who are emboldened by the global rise of authoritarian leaders. The inability of platforms to manage harassment and provide effective reporting mechanisms leads to a hostile environment for us and the communities we represent in our advocacies.

This causes us to suffer mental health challenges, which sometimes leads us to ultimately abandon, and even deliberately boycott these platforms. We take control of the narrative by choosing to disengage from online spaces that promised to bring us freedom and community.

What *will* make us safe is to ensure that platforms take our reports seriously and manage harassment effectively. 'Silver bullet' measures like age verification systems are not only disproportionate, but also inappropriate – they violate our rights to freedom and autonomy.

Alongside shadow-banning and rampant online harassment, inherently biased (read: heteronormative and white-centered) technologies and policies continue to reinforce the erasure of marginalised youth voices, sending a

clear message: our voices and identities don't matter in these spaces.

In this way, these platforms and services contribute not only to digital exclusion and erasure of entire communities, but also to harmful ripple effects that extend into everyday life – from policy development to healthcare access and equal opportunities.

This erasure isn't just a failure for young people and marginalised groups, it is a failure for society as a whole. Policies based on this exclusion are not only ineffective and misaligned with reality, but also fundamentally unjust. They fail to address the unique needs of marginalised young people.

Give us a seat at the 'grown up' table for continued action

The only path to dismantling the patriarchal and racist foundations upon which these systems are built is by involving communities, particularly marginalised communities, at every step of the way. Leaving it to the same old tools with the same old folks who are benefiting from the oppressive system can't be our way out of this.

We cannot allow the same predominant demographic of actors with limited understanding of the local realities to dictate who gets visibility and who remains silenced. Whether through guidelines for the protection of minors or through other sets of principles, making online spaces safe should be a constant conversation for all, most importantly for us young people who are at the centre of these debates. Our involvement should go beyond mere panels, conversations, youth assemblies, task forces, or advisory panels. It requires for us to be part of reimagining power structures where no one is left behind.

Young leaders—particularly from marginalised groups, and racialised and queer communities—also play an important role in this and should be given a seat at the 'grown-up' table. We should create spaces where all generations can collaborate as equals and embrace true co-conspiratorship, instead of falling back on performative "allyship" that is pinkwashed or race-washed.

"Nothing for us without us" is a principle we need to keep pushing for, from policymaking to product design. What we need are community-centred, open and inclusive services that would genuinely make young people feel safe, empowered and heard.

(This article could not have been written without the ample and invaluable work of Janine Patricia Santos, PhD, Policy Advisor at EDRi)

Knowledge can only be alive if it is shared

Jurij Krpan, Johanna Lenhart

Jurij Krpan from <u>Kersnikova</u> Institute talks to Johanna Lenhart from <u>Ars Electronica</u> about how hierarchical our interactions with humans and non-humans are in technology, society, and education, and how these hierarchies can be dissolved into more horizontal, less anthropocentric approaches.

Kersnikova Institute is a non-profit and non-governmental cultural organization that serves as an institutional frame for four venues: <u>Kapelica Gallery</u>, a world-renowned platform for contemporary investigative arts, the hackerspace <u>Rampa</u>, which is a lab for mechatronics, the inspirational laboratory <u>BioTehna</u>, which focuses on the artistic research of living systems, and Vivarium, a lab for bionics where the activities of the other two labs are merging.

What is the mission of Kersnikova?

From the very beginning, Kersnikova's mission was to bring to Ljubljana the most fascinating works of art that deal with existence, ontologically speaking, but observed through today's conditions and in the near future. Since the early nineties, with the development of the Internet, with the development of personal computing, ICT, everyone became connected, and we were confronted with how disruptive embracing technology can be. Hosting artists who were working with different technological and scientific discoveries, allowed us to approach technology, not just as users, but as informed individuals, where technologies were just tools that allowed artists and creatives to express themselves.

But from the beginning, access to technology was expensive and limited. The role of the Kapelica Gallery was to facilitate access to artists, to contemporary technologies, and to necessary knowledge, by connecting them with scientists, engineers, and other institutions. The gallery became a place where people could come and discuss their interests. We started commissioning works and developing them together with artists – and as the works became more and more demanding, we had to bring in engineers from the outside, scientists, and other collaborators. To be completely independent, we eventually decided to build our own technological platforms. Now we have a biotechnology lab, a mechatronics lab, and to merge the two, a bionics lab.

I read that Kersnikova originally originated from a student organization?

Yes, that is an interesting detail. During socialism, students were a quite privileged class in society. They were very powerful, and their voices were widely heard. They were financed by taxes derived from their student-side jobs, and that money went into social welfare, recreation, student exchange, and culture. That was a very interesting moment, because in culture, for example, you have these cultural elites who decide who gets funded, who gets the space, who gets presented, and so on. And suddenly, the student organization was able to support different artists, and different projects. This happened vastly in the seventies and eighties. I worked with the student organization as an

architect, organizing exhibitions, and eventually they asked me to run what was until then a multipurpose space – Kapelica – as a gallery.

Research at Kersnikova is driven by experimentation, curiosity and investigation. It also looks at the connectedness of nature and technology.

Technology as such is inspired by nature. In most cases it is the reverse engineering of nature. At some point we understood how damaging the use of technology can be – in terms of resources, energy and so on. Now, the fascination with technology is still there, but we are starting to draw more and more inspiration from nature itself. Recently, with biotechnologies, with the development of bio-media and scientific protocols, working with life science has become more accessible. So, it was natural that we started to incorporate more and more of these biological inspirations into our program. But instead of using science to build the devices for profit, we establish situations where plants, animals and other non-human living beings are invited to collaborate. For example, artificial intelligence: if it is used by humans, it will damage nature even more. Where we see the opportunity for the future is when artificial intelligence is not used by humans, but by plants and animals and other organisms. We are trying to create a situation where non-humans can emancipate themselves from the biased human perspective.

And how does this fit in with the Critical ChangeLab?

The Critical ChangeLab is dedicated to investigating democracy and democratic processes. For us, the term democracy is an abstraction of the idea that you have to consider freedom of others as well. We want to try to rethink the anthropocentric approach by trying to understand the connections between technology, humans, and non-humans, in order to dissolve the hierarchical pyramid that puts humans at the top into something more horizontal, more rhizomatic – and this is, where democracy comes in.

The same goes for education: The processes of education today are very much top-down, cloning existing knowledge to kids, to pupils, to students,

and so on. Recently, we started to explore ways in which educational processes in our institution, such as workshops with children, adolescents, young adults, adults, and so on, are no longer led from one tutor to participants, but from peer to peer so that knowledge is transferred horizontally. First, we adopted an approach by Jacques Rancière, who developed an approach described in a book called The Ignorant Schoolmaster, where students learn how to learn by themselves and how to help each other. And now we are building a digital platform, an application, that will be an intermediary between learning to achieve their intellectual emancipation from top down knowledge cloning. But we are not going to use it as a learning tool, we are going to use it as a sharing tool. Knowledge can only be alive if it is shared – we share and we care. That is very important here.

We designed this platform as a game, so kids want to engage in the process. With a custom-built artificial intelligence, users build their own personal assistant – you go through the design phases, etc., and in the end, you understand how AI is built without the top-down knowledge input. What we are developing in the Critical ChangeLab, however, is the soft part, so to speak. We have to develop this peer-to-peer knowledge transfer. In the first phase, we are working with mentors to make them understand that top-down knowledge transfer is not the way to go, and we are developing together how to encourage the kids to play this game. In the second phase, we will have them test peer-to-peer learning. And that will be our zero generation. And then in the third phase, we will observe how these

kids share knowledge, how these kids actually play the game – not just at Kersnikova, it will be an open platform so everybody can use it.

What are you most looking forward to in the Critical ChangeLab?

Working with others means learning to build bridges. We don't want to replace the school system, because it's been doing its job for 4000 years. With our approach we are trying to give a hand, we are trying to build a bridge. Once our system of horizontal learning works, we can work really well with the traditional system, because what kids learn in school can also be applied to this gaming platform that will emancipate them in the real world. So that's what I'm looking for with the Critical ChangeLab, to figure out how to build a bridge between our experience and the traditional approach to education.

Educating Through Dreams: Danilo Dolci's *Ciascuno cresce solo se sognato*

Ciascuno cresce solo se sognato

C'è chi insegna
guidando gli altri come cavalli
passo per passo:
forse c'è chi si sente soddisfatto
così guidato.

C'è chi insegna lodando
quanto trova di buono e divertendo:
c'è pure chi si sente soddisfatto
essendo incoraggiato.

C'è pure chi educa, senza nascondere
l'assurdo ch'è nel mondo, aperto ad ogni
sviluppo ma cercando
d'essere franco all'altro come a sé,
sognando gli altri come ora non sono:
ciascuno cresce solo se sognato.

Danilo Dolci, from
Il limone lunare: poema
per la radio dei poveri,
1970

Each Person Grows Only If Dreamed

There are those who teach
by leading others like horses,
step by step:
perhaps some feel satisfied
being guided this way.

There are those who teach by praising
what they find good and entertaining:
some may feel satisfied,
being encouraged.

And then there are those who educate,
without hiding the absurdity of the world,
open to every possibility, yet striving
to be honest with others as with themselves,
dreaming of others as they are not yet:
each person grows only if dreamed.

Danilo Dolci (1924–1997) was an Italian poet, educator, and activist, often called the "Gandhi of Sicily" for his commitment to nonviolent resistance and grassroots social change.

His work in Sicily, where he fought against poverty, social injustice, and the Mafia's influence, was deeply rooted in participatory democracy and community-driven activism.

Dolci's approach to education rejected authoritarian and prescriptive teaching methods in favor of a model that fostered critical thinking, creativity, and personal growth.

His poetry reflects this philosophy, particularly the belief that education is not about dictating knowledge, but about envisioning and nurturing human potential.

Dreaming as Resistance

By dedicating this final article of Issue 9 to Dolci's poetry, we invite readers to embrace a radical perspective: **dreaming is not a passive escape, but an essential act of resistance**.

When we dream of new possibilities — be it in education, politics, or social justice — we refuse to accept the world as it is. Instead, we insist on what it could become.

As we close this issue, Dolci's words remain a reminder that growth is not imposed, it is imagined into being.

Join
European Alternatives