Active Citizenship

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✎ Academic Article

Active European Citizenship between Action and Vision "Doing Europe" as an alternative Approach to European Identity Construction

Abstract: *This paper argues that personal experiences through political participation concerning the European project lead to multiple Europes. Based on qualitative interview data, I address the question of what young, politically active Europeans consider as "Europe". My findings eventually are reflected in the model of "Doing Europe": This concept can be understood as a constructivist investigation of active European citizenship, which differs from the EU's approach of constructing a European identity.*

Introduction: The European paradox

"At the present time, would you say that, in general, things are going in the right direction or in the wrong direction in the European Union?" In March 2014, the Eurobarometer survey, a tool that measures the public opinion in and towards the European Union, showed that the future of Europe is mostly seen pessimistically by Europeans today: 37% think that things are going in the wrong direction, whereas only 30% are optimistic about the future of Europe (Special Eurobarometer 415 2014: 77). These numbers show that the ongoing process of political Europeanisation does not necessarily lead to a pro-European attitude and is even further away from giving birth to a European identity. We face the paradox that although Europeans conceive Europe as a given life reality, and it is especially important to young Europeans since they profit from mobility, a single currency, and international friends, they are very critical of EU institutions.

This paradox shows that although Europe's influence on people's lives is widely unquestioned, considerable differences exist in what people consider as "Europe". In addition to the plurality of "Europes" in the public discourse (prominently reflected in the inconsistent linguistic separation of Europe and the EU), there also exist individually constructed imaginaries of Europe and its imagined futures, which also influence the way Europe is conceived. The implicit plurality of Europes makes it difficult for Europeans to identify with the European project, since Europe is mostly defined by what it is not. My findings will show that there is nothing like a "single Europe", but only a personal image of it that shapes the process of Europeanization.

Referring to Ulrich Beck's concept of risk society, my text will not only look at the numerous challenges that young adults are facing in Europe today. One of the biggest challenges young Europeans have to confront is youth unemployment –with a rate of 21.7% in the EU-28 area in the second quarter of 2014[1] – but it is far away from being the only one. I also examine how young Europeans take the chance to address their issues in Europe through their political actions, and ask the critical question whether these political actions are being recognised by the EU. By considering the visions and actions of young people, I hope not only to describe the current European reality of "Multiple Europes" constructed by young Europeans, but also to build a picture of its potential future. I focus on political participation for and against Europe, where I see an example of a space where the current young generation is engaged as active European citizens.

I will show that the EU's proclamation of a "single Europe" in their politicised use of the concept of a "collective European identity" is not a solution for current EU problems like Euroscepticism, the lack of trust in EU institutions and the economical and identity crisis of the EU, but rather an obstacle to a solution. And while it is not the objective here to be overcritical of the European Union's aims or practices, a critical evaluation of some aspects of its communication strategies, the underlying ideologies, and the political effects cannot be avoided. How to think in a new way about "European identity" beyond the ontological theories of society is the core task of the paper. Its approach to European identity, at once normative, empirical and practical, is located in the interdisciplinary field of ideas from philosophical, political and sociological European studies. The aim of the following paper is to give a theoretical reflection on European identity that can best be understood by acknowledging its provisional character: Europe is characterized by, and can progress along with, the interplay of individually developed visions of Europe on the basis of personal experience. Therefore, the absence of a collective European Identity will not be regarded as a deficit but as a productive possibility of Europe's future development.

The European discourse between Euroscepticism and EUphoria

By claiming a "single Europe" as an unquestioned fact, the EU neutralises the current shape of the EU project and shuts down all potential for discussion about alternative European imaginaries. In her analysis of European Union brochures, Bostanci points out how European identity is presented in terms known from commercial advertising: "the brochures seem to promote an ideology pivoting on individualism and material gratification rather than solidarity and anti- or post-materialist ideals"

(Bostanci 2014: 22).

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The extensive use of the word "non-negotiable"[2] in political statements reflects this tendency of legitimising political decisions by declaring them necessity. Politics is presented as the executing power of a "force majeure", while a discussion and political involvement by the people then becomes unnecessary. The EU's narratives of a single Europe not only attempt to contribute to the illusion of a unified Europe, but they also present it as "truth" and as insulated from critique.

This essentialist construction of Europe is well known from Eurosceptic rhetoric. But there is a widely underestimated parallel and simultaneous opposing tendency to use the same essentialist argumentative tactics in pro-European discourse. The EU integration process is portrayed as a "European destiny" not only by EU institutions, but also by confederal European writers and European Studies researchers. Biebuyck and Rumford point out that the "normal science" of European studies still holds on to a positivistic definition of Europe as a falsifiable object. Europe is presented as a superior form of politics in the global age when it comes to mobility, human rights and globalized markets. This is also reflected in a narrative and entertaining writing style: "The accessibility and clarity of these texts help in 'selling' – both literally and symbolically – Europe as the future model for global political integration" (Biebuyck and Rumford 2011: 7).

On the other end of the spectrum the opinion towards the EU is approached as a bureaucratic monster that disrupts the conventional and accepted continuities of traditional European life. The European election has proved what Biebuyck and Rumford predicted: "a Europe of reaction, protection and exclusion now circulates with great ferocity across the imagined heartland" (Biebuyck and Rumford 2011: 10).

Eurosceptic and pro-European voices both seek to legitimize their political agenda by using apocalyptic, non-falsifiable, and non-negotiable rhetoric. It is not the task of this paper to evaluate their effectiveness, but to ask for something essential that is missing on both sides: what about the European demos?

Politicisation of Identity construction in the European risk society

As I have mentioned above, the EU tries to naturalize the narratives of a single Europe, but not only are they too general to provide a collective self-description, they also cannot give a sense of direction in the crisis of confidence that the EU is going through. When it comes to present evaluation, past benefits count little if millions of 15- to 24-year-olds in the EU are unemployed. A single Europe is not a solution for the EU's democratic deficit, or a cure-all against growing euroscepticism.

The concept of risk society by Ulrich Beck seems to be a useful concept to describe the uncertainty that especially plagues young adults in Europe today. A European-wide unemployment rate of 21,6% among young Europeans (15 to 24-year-olds) [3] is just one challenge they have to cope with: the support of an ageing population, the exclusion of millions of young people without EU citizenship, the consequences of a severe financial crisis and global challenges like climate change and economic competition with BRIC countries- comprise just some of the other burdens in the seemingly endless space overloaded with problems that young Europeans call their life context.

Beck's concept of risk society reflects these changes in the construction of a European reality (Beck 1986). It can be used to reveal how risks are used politically in the current EU crisis discourse. Since they did not happen yet but are postulated to happen in the near future, they are based on the pure belief in their "truth" that legitimises political action. Therefore, knowledge of risks in the European crisis is used as a power instrument constructed by magnifying, playing down or changing what is accepted as "true". Media and politics play a crucial part in that game, though intellectuals and academic voices also hold key positions in the power struggle for sovereignty of interpretation. Consequently, politicised uses of risks postulate the impossibility to change the current conditions in Europe and keep the citizens from seeking for alternatives. Meanwhile, it legitimises people in power to prevent catastrophes. This paradox of demanding political power to avoid "the worst" without giving citizens the possibility to engage in the discourse is the main stroke for political participation in European questions. Rather than envisioning a better Europe, the European discourse is centred on the defensive reaction to consequences of former political decisions. These findings of determining and restricting external structures seem to contradict with youth's political agency to act as active agents of change. But this is not as paradoxical as it first seems to be. Youth as a life stage has always been associated with imagination and creativity –as well as boldness– and political action seems to provide the potential to function as a space of self-expression and political change.

In the aftermath of the Euro-crisis, new divisions have arisen in Europe that are distinct from the old political "East-West"-cleavages. In addition, the EU is dominated today by an economic North-South divide. But risks do not only imply the power to cause new divisions and potential sources of conflict, they can also create new forms of collectivity in Europe, across national borders. If the main task is no longer to gain more territory or political influence, but rather, to eliminate risks, according to Beck it becomes "rational" to form alliances of cooperation rather than competition. The communality of an uncertain "European destiny", shared by young Europeans, provides the possibility of solidarity. But it should be critically highlighted that this collectivity stands on very shaky ground, since it is born out of a defensive reaction to avoid the worst, not out of a positive common interest. At this point, the

relevance of visions of a better European future seems to be more productive. Both risks and visions refer to future European development, and by so doing, already impact the European reality as it is today. They both differ from the EU's concept of a European identity in the way that they replace the past-oriented narrative of a "single Europe" with the future-oriented models of multiple, individually constructed Europes. They hereby offer an alternative approach to reach the goal of a stronger sense of collectivity among European citizens.

Although the crisis causes suffering among people and especially young Europeans, this seems not to be enough to generate fundamental change in the European society. What is needed to enact real social transformations in Europe are alternatives to fight for, instead of the simple defensive prevention of risks. My findings show that if politics is experienced as a collective and active process of negotiation of alternatives rather than a purely defensive prevention of what would be worst, there is space for a new political culture in active European citizenship.

What is Europe? The concept of Multiple Europes

Rather than having a specific meaning that can theoretically be defined, Europe is more of an umbrella term for different meanings on multiple (cultural, political, geographical…) layers. They are accompanied by multiple connotations depending on a variety of factors and context-specific settings. The concept of "multiple Europes" by Biebuyck et al. is a productive way to include these multiplicities, acknowledging that there are Europes in between binary terms like old/new, East/West, core/periphery. Instead of the EU's goal to be "united in diversity", Europe's multiplicity is here valued as an important factor of Europe's dynamic status. Certainly, it also reflects the fragmentation and growing uncertainty of European reality, but at the same time takes into account its contingency. In contrast to the EU's tendency to fix Europe in binaries or images of stability and order, it is not the aim of this paper to come to a single or even multiple definite definition of what Europe is.

In accordance to Rumford et al., my research shows that it is more rewarding to explore Europe's heterogeneous political imaginaries by pointing to Europe as a dynamic site of multiple and sometimes contradictory constructions. While my findings show that European imaginaries are characterized by their multiplicity, they do not provide a foundation for a European identity. The fact that Europe is constructed in personal experiences does not mean that it is not at the same time an important life reality. Rather, it is a personal European reality produced in multiple and differing forms of action and vision.

If young Europeans are considered as active constructors of the social environment that surrounds them, their practices of (re-)articulation and (re-)construction of their multiple Europes need to gain special attention: what kind of dynamics in European multiplicity can be identified, how do different images of Europe overlap and do they form hybrid forms of Europeanness? These are questions that should be further investigated. My contribution is to find European multiplicity in active European citizenship and their future visions of Europe.

The future of Europe is utopian or nothing

The concept of utopia is often criticized and even rejected by scholars due to its double meaning: "Utopian" is often used to describe something impossible that seems to be unrealistic to reach. Apart from this meaning though, there is the attempt to use it as a word to describe a condition that is possible, but not yet real. This is the definition that I will stick to in the following. More precisely, Ernst Bloch, a German philosopher, developed in 1959 in his book "*The principle of hope*" (orig.:"*Das Prinzip Hoffnung*") the concept of "concrete utopia" (Bloch 1959:).

Concrete utopian thinking about Europe is not fantasy, in the way that it does not have to be proved right in reality. In contrast to Europe as the political ideology I criticised earlier, concrete utopias of Europe seek to encourage alternative "thinking and doing Europe". Being independent from immediate realisation does not mean that there is no direct link to the real historical and socio-political context and that it is encompassing for all life realities in different cultural spheres. The enduring risk of totalitarianism linked to utopias due to their proximity to political ideologies has to be faced and counteracted with political education and controlled by democratic legitimated institutions.

At this point, the concept of vision is a useful analytical device. Visions are based on the idea that things could be different, and different would be better. Vision here is not understood in terms of religious moments, nor is it understood in Marxist or similarly critically inspired terms as abstract idealistic phenomena with little connection to reality. Instead, visions are expected to be constructed in omnipresent social practices to make sense of the personal political involvement and can offer insights into political identification.

The EU's hope for a European identity

Processes of identification, social categorisation, feeling of belonging, solidarity, trust, group membership and "othering" of Non-EU-members are crucial parts of an identity building process. But looking at European empirical trends, Eurobarometer data from May 2014 prooves that identification with Europe is fairly modest: European citizens are not very interested in European politics, they do not have much trust in the EU institutions, neither do they feel attached to Europe, nor do they feel very well-informed about the EU (Special Eurobarometer 415 2014: 58; 23; 47). On the other hand, European identity is called the "missing link metaphor" that seems to be the EU's solution for what goes wrong in Europe. But so far, more than 40 years after the declaration of European Identity by the EU, there is little European Identity to speak of. Nevertheless, European youth is far from being

ignored. This becomes outstanding in European youth policy strategies such as the "Erasmus +" program which functions as a central focus of European identity politics (Nielsen-Sikora 2009: 257).

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Regarding these empirical realities among European citizens, the Commission's aim to attach European citizens to the European Union and thereby to foster the participation in European decision-making processes seems to be a rather unrealistic goal. The extent and the influence of European citizenship tend to be overestimated by the EU. A closer look on my findings shows, however, the potential of active European citizenship for the future development of the EU: European identity is not about seeking for common roots, collective culture and a shared history. Interviewees' responses to the question what European identity means to them reflect that common experiences, collective action and the willingness to construct a better Europe are more influential aspects. Regarding the European risk society, Ulrich Beck points out that this young European generation especially has the potential to construct an alternative European future. The transnational experiences of insecurity and interdependence they share in times of crisis was seen by Beck as a chance to bring active citizens of Europe back in.

The potential of personal European identification in political participation

As kind of a framing discussion, I would like to bring up the question what it means for the participants to be a European citizen. Identity necessarily involves the question of what "I want to be" in the future. Citizenship in the legal terminology[4] is not an identity, but EU citizens are classified by their national government as such. Whereas the concept I would like to refer to as "active European citizenship" is defined through citizen actions which demonstrate a clear and functioning exercise of their civil rights in the European context. Instead of asking the question "what is an active European citizen?" I would like to turn attention to the question why active European citizenship is important. I will show that it might be an alternative way to bring Europeans closer to the European project, distinct from the European identity discourse pushed forward by the EU.

The willingness of citizens to invest time and energy into political activities for collective and social questions can be seen as one of the essential foundations of functioning modern, democratic societies. The EU has linked many hopes and expectations to an active European citizenship. For example, more political participation of European citizens could stimulate hope to solve the democratic deficit, and by so doing could also increase the legitimacy of EU institutions, stabilise and promote the political system of the EU, foster social solidarity and civic interaction, as well as mediate between national and supranational levels. At 17 per cent, more than every fifth citizen in Europe holds a voluntary position or carries out other unpaid work in civil society organisations (Immerfall et al. 2010: 17). Although this civil involvement and citizens' "passive" participation in elections appears to be necessary, it is by far not sufficient as a condition for a dynamic European civil society. What is ultimately decisive for the functioning and the vitality of a civil society is the extent to which its citizens actively participate and launch activities within this context of political participation. "Doing Europe" as a form of involvement is characterized in particular by the feeling of responsibility for Europe, consciousness of contingency and the personal effectiveness of action, both in form of limited influence and experiences of personal sway in socio-political questions.

An alternative approach of active European citizenship: "Doing Europe"

The concept of "Doing Europe" is a model developed from the available interview data in which the development of personal visions –especially in their active-participatory form– may eventually give rise to identification with Europe. It reflects the circulation and interdependence of action and vision: The interview data has shown that not only do visions of a better Europe motivate active political participation, But also that the experiences of involvement mentioned above fundamentally affect and reconstruct visions of Europe. Imaginaries of Europe are inseparably connected with the political participation of the young interviewees. By examining the relationship between European visions and their associated fields of practice in active European participation, much can be understood about the multiple Europes of young adults today.

> *What was a prerequisite of political participation for the young interviewees was the feeling of personal effectiveness of their action, which can be defined as the experience to affect social conditions through their own activities.*

Taking into account that young people have been hit harshly by the economic crisis in Europe, it is of peculiar interest to consider the circumstances under which young Europeans become agents of change. What was a prerequisite of political participation for the young interviewees was the feeling of personal effectiveness of their action, which can be defined as the experience to affect social conditions through their own activities. That is, only if they anticipated their action to reach the envisioned European reality in the future, did they actively take part in the European construction process. Again, here it becomes clear that visions are not "utopian" in an unrealistic sense, but as a reality that is not yet reached, and better than the current status quo. This can be regarded as a basis to develop a consciousness of contingency, that is mentioned in interviewees' answers to the question what motivates them to further investigate in the future development of Europe.

The normative orientation of European political participation is to experience the feeling of

responsibility for the future development of Europe. This is often mentioned as the "opening up" for personal involvement. In a broader understanding than that of a legal status, European citizenship is the personal choice to engage in civil society. In their political work, the interviewees experienced that being part of the young generation in Europe also includes a special responsibility to actively take part in the future of Europe. What they value as profit of their European involvement is the possibility to reflect, exchange and cooperate in order to create new visions of the European future.

Being asked what the effects of their political participation were, interestingly, the interviewees all mentioned (besides new friends, more knowledge and understanding of the political discourses in general) the foresight of their personal degree of effectiveness (positive and negative) as being central to their personal development. In the long run, this competence is not only an individual gain, but will have social consequences through the active participation in political activities which seek to change Europe for the better.

The Research Method: Studying European Futures

According to Beck, in risk societies the future catastrophe is the main force that mobilizes people to act. And examples like sustainability discourses, forecasts of future trends and possible developments in all spheres of our lives indicate that European societies are beginning to realign priorities to more future-oriented outcomes than actions based on precedence (and act according to traditions, for example). This change gave rise to an interdisciplinary field of study that focuses its attention on the future.

The dilemma of research on the future is that its object of interest is not yet real and can therefore not be proven right or wrong. However, it is not the question here of whether or not future visions of Europe will finally become real, but rather how and what concrete utopian thinking can contribute to the development of Europe today. Consequently, futures research must be regarded as closely connected to the actual conditions of living in Europe today. It asks for future visions based on the subjective experiences of realities. Therefore, Visions of the European future as research objects are only possible to study in the sense of their impact on Europe as it is experienced today, not in the sense of what it could be in the future.

However, the criteria of what constitutes a vision must be defined. This question refers to an intervention problem: from a constructivist perspective, Europe can only be regarded from a subjective perspective placed in an individual's life context that structures and thereby constructs what is seen as "Europe". Because the observer's "Europe" reflects his/her life context, future visions of Europe are necessarily subjective and contingent, but not arbitrary.

As a frame I decided on qualitative research in the sense of partially structured interviews. The interviewer is not in a receptive, passive role, but tries to find out as precisely as possible what the interviewee means by asking further questions without any evaluation from the part of the interviewer. The main interview topics were—in line with the title of my study – political action and vision in the European context. A socio-demographic questionnaire is introduced and filled in at the beginning of the interview. It asks for the personal and biographic situation and facilitates comparisons with other interviewees. Apart from that, it also functions as a first ordering of personal data to facilitate the conduct of the interview.

The scenario method that was used in the group discussion is an instrument of futures research to develop future visions of Europe. Based on facts and developing trends in Europe today a group of five young European interviewees analysed inherent causalities and interconnections. The group creatively filled in blank spots of the given information with their future visions of Europe. They used their own personal experiences that they gained in political participation to critically consider disruptive elements and limits of influence in order to construct a "concrete utopia" of Europe.

Conclusion: Europe could be different tomorrow

Essentialist identity concepts depend on the narratives of the European integration as a historically linear process without ruptures, setbacks and alternative options. This strategy used not only by Eurosceptic, but also by pro-European actors must be criticised a sacralisation of the sources of political legitimacy that hinders from developing alternative options for Europe through the narrative of a "single Europe". The EU's measures aiming to construct a collective European identity seem to be based on a rather unrealistic and far too optimistic picture of the attitudes of citizens towards the EU's potential as a site of identification. Besides, the EU overestimates the will of citizens to become involved. This combination of false presumptions and overloaded identity construction strategies might even be counterproductive for the attitudes towards Europe. What is needed more is a critical approach to the limited spaces of political participation.

European citizens so far mostly exist on paper. Without any doubt, it is important to redesign European political decision-making processes and change the institutions in a way to bring people back in, so that eventually they might identify with the European project. European institutions should be created to expand people's empowerment, not to cut it. Moreover, my findings show that in order to support active European citizenship, Europeans must feel influential and heard in the European discourse. Their political participation includes learning from inevitable mistakes in their activities. Nevertheless, not only do they envision real utopias, but engage in the construction of Europe to make utopias real. In the end, the realization of their visions of Europe will depend on citizen's agency and their creative wish to participate in making a better Europe.

Consequently, a redistribution of power from an elite-driven European project to a more bottom-up movement would empower European citizens to find new forms of political action and alternative ways of thinking about the future. To develop a consciousness of contingency of the European realities would be the first step to invalidate the non-negotiable policy proclaimed in the European discourse today. Through their political activities the interviewees experience their general social responsibility as well as their personal effectiveness.

The contribution to the discourse about European identity by the concept of "Doing Europe" is that the identity-endowing function is seen at the level of activity, namely the political participation processes themselves, while the space in which they take place, i.e. the European Union, is understood as its product. European visions are thoughts about a possible future based on the opportunities that Europe creates today. "Doing Europe" as a process is based on the openness to learn, as well as to redefine the European space. It could then fill the gap between the abstract ideas of a European identity promoted by the EU commission and the everyday lives of European citizens.

How and whether the goal of an active European citizenship has the potential to pursue and foster the development of a European identification is a question that needs further investigation outside the academic discourse. The findings make clear that in the European discourse, European realities are not simply self-generating but they can be shaped by active European citizens. The paper wants to raise discussions of youth agency and its expressions within the post-crisis European reality, which they reconstruct as active agents of change. European youth has to be recognized as precious force that is ready to invest actions and visions to construct a better Europe. If there is an opening up of the discussion of what the European integration process could constitute Europe could be different tomorrow. The political attempt of this study is to strengthen the importance of an active European citizenship through political participation rather than investigating in EU's measures of a European identity construction on the basis of a "single Europe": It is not important to say "I am European". It is important to care about the European future and the people we share it with. Solidarity can only be consequential in action, not in talking about political ideals.

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[1] This is more than twice as high as the adult unemployment rate of 9.0% in Europe at that time. (Eurostat data January 2015)

[2] voted the taboo word of the year in Germany in 2010

[3] Eurostat data August 2014

[4] Since the Lisbon Treaty, European citizenship gives EU citizens (Art. 20, AEUV) the right to vote, freedom of establishment, free movement, and possibility to candidate for elections, to receive protection and the right to send requests to the EU. These rights depend on the status of the national citizenship.

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