Embracing Democratic Conflict: Encountering the Other in Youth Political Participation

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Abstract: Democracy is inherently conflictual. Education should support individuals in navigating an agonistic and contested democratic space, where political identities and subjectivities are continuously shaped and reshaped through processes of conflict and negotiation. Drawing on 26 phenomenological in-depth interviews with young members of leading European youth organisations, this contribution explores how personal encounters with cultural and national diversity foster a profound process of getting to know the other. Participants' narratives illustrate that these direct experiences not only deepen their self-awareness but also enables youth to reframe conflict as a dynamic space for constructive dialogue, without necessarily converging on identical viewpoints. Such transformative encounters highlight the central role of the educational relationship in fostering interventions and practices that allow young people to acknowledge and embrace conflict as an inherent dimension of democracy.

Keywords: Democratic conflict, youth political participation, education.

Abstract: La democrazia è intrinsecamente conflittuale. L'educazione dovrebbe supportare gli individui a muoversi all'interno di uno spazio democratico agonistico e caratterizzato da tensioni, in cui le identità e le soggettività politiche si costruiscono e si trasformano continuamente attraverso il conflitto e la negoziazione. A partire da 26 interviste fenomenologiche in profondità con giovani rappresentanti di organizzazioni giovanili europee, questo contributo esplora come gli incontri personali con la diversità culturale e nazionale possano attivare un processo significativo di scoperta e conoscenza dell'altro. Le narrazioni dei partecipanti mostrano come queste esperienze dirette non solo favoriscano una maggiore consapevolezza di sé, ma permettano ai giovani di reinterpretare il conflitto come uno spazio dinamico di dialogo costruttivo, senza che sia necessario giungere a posizioni comuni. Tali incontri trasformativi evidenziano il ruolo cruciale della relazione educativa nel promuovere percorsi e pratiche che aiutino i giovani a riconoscere e accogliere il conflitto come parte integrante della vita democratica.

Parole chiave: conflitto democratico, partecipazione politica giovanile, educazione.

1. Conflict and the Formation of Democratic Subjectivities: The Educational Value of Encounter

In a world increasingly marked by uncertainty and fluidity, education is called to support individuals in recognising the other not as a threat, but as an opportunity to grow more fully into their humanity. This shift involves cultivating relationships grounded in acceptance, understanding, and the ability to engage with difference as a constitutive element of democratic life (Fiorucci & Crescenza, 2023). Rather than eliminating conflict, such an educational approach embraces it as a space for negotiation and transformation, where subjectivities are not fixed but continually reshaped through encounter and dialogue (Biesta, 2011, 2023). According to Gert Biesta (2015, 2020, 2023), the task of education should not be merely to socialise individuals into a fixed repertoire of norms and values but instead to cultivate an environment in which people are equipped to navigate an agonistic public sphere. In this space, political identities and subjectivities are continuously contested, negotiated, and reformed through encounters with conflict and difference. This perspective is profoundly informed by the contributions of Chantal Mouffe (2000, 2005) and Jacques Rancière (1995, 1999), whose works collectively challenge the assumption that democracy is about achieving a harmonious consensus among equal interlocutors. Central to this framework is the concept of agonistic pluralism as elaborated by Mouffe. She rejects the ideal of deliberative democracy, a model that presupposes the elimination of differences in favour of rational deliberation, and instead posits that the division between 'us' and 'them' is an inherent feature of democratic life (Mouffe, 2005). Within this model, conflict is not a defect to be corrected but rather a constitutive element of the political process. The transformation of antagonism into agonism is thus seen as essential: while antagonism traditionally casts the other as an enemy to be vanquished, agonistic politics reframes this relationship as a contest between legitimate adversaries whose opposition is rooted in distinct political positions rather than in the desire for total annihilation of difference (Mouffe, 2000). In this way, the potential destructiveness of conflict is redirected into a constructive force that fosters critical dialogue and ongoing political transformation. Biesta (2020, 2023) builds on these insights by arguing that the role of education must shift from a focus on transmitting pre-established values to one that actively encourages people to engage with the inherent uncertainties and conflicts of democratic life. In this view, educational practices should create conditions under which individuals learn to negotiate differences and critically reflect upon their own identities in a continuously evolving socio-political context. This means that the formation of democratic subjectivities is not an endpoint to be reached by instilling static principles; it is an ongoing process marked by repeated encounters with diverse perspectives and the persistent re-articulation of one's civic identity (Biesta, 2023). Within this transformative process, political engagement becomes a means of challenging and reconfiguring established power relations. Rancière (1995, 1999) contributes to this discussion by conceptualising politics as a disruption of the prevailing "police order" or established hierarchy, a disruption that makes it possible for the excluded to assert their equality. According to Rancière, true democratic events are those in which pre-assigned roles are destabilised, and new forms of political subjecthood emerge from acts of self-assertion. Biesta (2023) adopts this notion to reinforce the idea that democratic education must focus on opening spaces where contested identities can be renegotiated, rather than on creating citizens who conform to a stable, predetermined model of civic engagement. Moreover, this approach implicates a radical rethinking of the purpose of conflict in democratic contexts. Instead of viewing conflict solely as an obstacle to consensus, it is recast as a fertile ground for the development of political subjectivities. When individuals are placed in situations that demand the negotiation of differences, they are compelled to confront and deconstruct their own biases. Such exposure not only deepens self-awareness but also equips them with the resilience necessary to participate meaningfully in an ever-changing public sphere. In essence, conflict becomes less a symptom of dysfunction and more a catalyst for democratic renewal (Biesta, 2020, 2023). This theoretical stance is in stark contrast with more conventional liberal models of citizenship, which often posit that democratic education should result in the formation of rational, well-adjusted individuals ready to engage within a stable public order. Liberal and deliberative approaches typically assume that consensus, arguably the culmination of rational discourse, is both desirable and achievable. However, as Mouffe (2000, 2005) and Rancière (1995, 1999) argue, such consensus is frequently illusory because it obscures the fact that the political is

fundamentally a domain of power and conflict. By neglecting the inherently contestational nature of human relations, deliberative models risk producing citizens who are unprepared for the complexities of democratic life. Biesta's (2023) argument is therefore a call for an education that remains perpetually open-ended, continuously challenging individuals to engage with new forms of conflict and to re-evaluate their roles within the democratic process.

2. Living Democracies: Encounters with the Other in Young People's Experiences

Within this framework, the present study adopts a qualitative approach, drawing on a phenomenological-hermeneutic method (Mortari, 2016; Van Manen, 2016, 2023) to investigate the lived experiences of young citizens engaged in political participation across European democratic contexts. Data were collected between 2023 and 2024, through 26 in-depth online interviews with young members of prominent European youth organisations, notably the Advisory Council on Youth of the Council of Europe and the European Youth Forum (Sità, 2012). Both organisations actively promote youth rights and democratic participation, providing ideal contexts for examining the dynamics of youth engagement in contemporary democratic life (Advisory Council on Youth, 2023; European Youth Forum, 2023). The use of online interviews enabled the inclusion of participants from a wide geographical spread, ensuring a diverse representation of socio-political contexts and lived experiences across Europe (O'Connor & Madge, 2017). A snowball sampling technique was used to identify and recruit participants capable of offering rich, reflective accounts of their political engagement (Emerson, 2015). This strategy proved particularly effective in accessing a network of young people whose narratives extended beyond conventional or institutionalised frameworks of participation. Among the interviewees, 15 identified as female and 11 as male, with ages ranging from 21 to 31 years old. Participants lived in various regions, including Southern, Central, Northern, Western, Southeastern, Southwestern, and Eastern Europe, as well as Western Asia and Western Africa. Most participants, 24 out of 26, were members of the European Youth Forum, and 12 were also part of the Advisory Council on Youth. Specifically, 14 interviewees were members solely of the European Youth Forum, 2 were affiliated exclusively with the Advisory Council, and 10 were members of both. While these two organisations framed the recruitment process, participants' narratives also referred spontaneously to a variety of other experiences. These references were not part of the selection criteria but emerged during the interviews as meaningful to their paths of engagement. Through these narratives, it became evident that many interviewees were also involved in multiple organisational contexts: 11 in National Organisations, 13 in National Youth Councils, and 14 in International Non-Governmental Youth Organisations, often holding more than one affiliation. The interviews were transcribed and yielded a corpus of approximately 400,000 words. Data saturation was monitored throughout the analysis process, and no new themes emerged in the final interviews (Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006). Data analysis was conducted through a phenomenological-hermeneutic lens, complemented by thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021). The use of NVivo software supported a systematic coding process, allowing for the identification of recurring themes and patterns within the interview transcripts (Coppola, 2011). The analysis revealed three core dimensions underpinning youth political participation in the accounts of the interviewees: the motivations that led them into political engagement; the encounters experienced across various settings; and the realisations or transformative learning processes emerging from these experiences. In particular, this contribution focuses on how encounters in a variety of environments, ranging from family contexts and educational institutions to youth organisations and international platforms, played a significant role in the development of democratic subjectivities. These diverse settings provided crucial opportunities for young people to engage with different perspectives, enter into dialogue, and gradually reconfigure their understanding of what it means to participate politically.

2.1 Discovering the Other: Encounters that Open Up New Worlds

Young people recounted that their journey in youth political participation was marked by encounters that opened up entirely new worlds. These encounters occurred in a variety of settings, from community-based initiatives to international youth organisations. For many, such experiences

provided the first clear evidence that another reality exists beyond their immediate surroundings. As an example, in discussing their time on the Erasmus programme, one young interviewee explained:

> It really helped me to understand a different culture, to do my best to understand what is going on around me. But it also provided me with a brand-new world for me. [The city is] very multicultural. I mean, students from all over the world are there. And that was a turning point in my life. I mean, I came back and the way that I was phasing, even life, it was completely changed, or improved I would say. (Interview 12, 2023).

Across various settings, young people encountered others in ways that revealed the other as a tangible element of the social fabric rather than an abstract concept.

2.2 Discovering Similarities: Recognising Common Grounds Towards a Sense of Collective Identity

Alongside their exposure to new worlds, many interviewees observed that these experiences also revealed significant commonalities. Whether through participation in international exchanges or within the vibrant networks of youth organisations, the recognition of shared values, ideals, and aspirations emerged as a central theme in their narratives. As young people engaged in a variety of shared experiences, many began to recognise meaningful connections with others. These encounters revealed a sense of common ground that transcended geographic, linguistic, and organisational boundaries, often fostering a feeling of unity and belonging within diverse contexts. One interviewee, reflecting on their first International Scout camp, captured this moment of connection vividly:

> I first went to my first International Scout camp. And there I met, for the first time ever, people that didn't speak [my native language]. […] And I would say this was until today the most impactful week of my life, because, you know, this feeling: you meet new people, you understand that there's way more similarities than things that divide you and then I made big friends. […] So, after this week I was full of 'Wow! What happened here?' (Interview 5, 2023).

This discovery of common ground was further underscored by reflections on the interconnectedness observed at international gatherings. One young person, discussing experiences at the European Youth Forum, noted:

> The [European] Youth Forum really is a gathering force. But it really shows, I think, that the world is very small and the same people, they will come back and meet you again. So that's very nice. […] So, I think it shows also that the world is not local anymore when you get the [European] Youth Forum, it's very international. […] So, in that sense, I mean the world is very small, but at the same time it's quite big (Interview 20, 2024).

These observations highlight that recognising similarities serves not only to bridge cultural distances, but also to foster a collective identity grounded in shared democratic ideals. Experiences that bring together individuals from different backgrounds, each with their varied languages, socio-cultural contexts, and ways of life, contributed to both personal growth and the development of robust networks. Such networks, in turn, reinforced an inclusive sense of belonging and a deep commitment to civic engagement.

2.3 Discovering Differences: Engaging with Diversity and Democratic Conflict

The most nuanced and multifaceted dimension of the youth narratives pertains to their evolving appreciation for difference itself. Participants narrated a journey of increasingly refined awareness, wherein encounters with diverse cultural, social, and political realities challenged and ultimately enriched their own worldviews. This process was often described as an awakening, one that prompted a departure from pre-existing biases and fostered an embrace of pluralism as an intrinsic aspect of democratic dialogue. A recurring insight was the realisation that differences should not be regarded as barriers but as opportunities for constructive conflict. One interviewee encapsulated this notion by highlighting the inherent value in perceiving disagreement through a cultural lens:

What I've also learned, especially from the Advisory Council on Youth, is that, for example, when you're in a meeting and have a disagreement about a certain topic, sometimes it's better to leave it unresolved and come back to it the next morning. By then, both of you may have a different perspective, perhaps because you've talked to other people about it, or even discussed it informally over a glass of wine. Then you might realise, 'Huh! Maybe we're disagreeing not on the core issue, but more on a cultural aspect, something that's inherited in our own state of mind' (Interview 9, 2023).

For others, engaging with communities traditionally viewed as "the other" was fundamental in dismantling long-held stereotypes. As one young person described, living in a country deeply divided between two communities, an extended period of dialogue and personal interaction served as a catalyst for shifting entrenched perceptions:

It was one of the life-changing moments for me, this experience. Up to that point, I was not very familiar with the other community, but then I started having more interactions. Today, I have friends, and we can openly discuss things, regardless of the division. [...] I am one of those people who really want to experience [my country]. I find it completely crazy to live in a country and not be able to see all of it. That curiosity, the one that drives you to understand different realities, was also a key factor for me. It helped me overcome my personal views or the biases I had simply because I was born into [my community] (Interview 12, 2023).

Beyond these individual epiphanies, several participants highlighted the importance of self-reflection and ongoing critical awareness in creating an environment where differing opinions could be not only managed but also genuinely valued. As one interviewee noted:
"I've definitely learned how to reflect on myself differently to check for biases, whether cultural, political, or whatever, and to keep myself reflecting" (Interview 19, 2024).
In this context, the presence of diverse cultural narratives triggered what can be understood as an agonistic process, one in which conflict, rather than being suppressed, is engaged with as a vital catalyst for democratic renewal. Interactions with people from distinct backgrounds, as recounted by youth engaged in both urban and rural settings, not only fostered empathy but also prompted a reconfiguration of personal and collective identities. For instance, one interviewee noted the importance of understanding "where people are situated" (Interview 25, 2024) as a means to appreciate that differing opinions often emanate from the complex interplay between personal histories and broader socio-cultural influences. In the words of another young person, involvement in music and diverse youth communities allowed them to appreciate that:
"I like it very much that I see so different people [...] it made me a person that can see the world from different perspectives" (Interview 4, 2023).
While confronting differences was sometimes challenging, provoking internal dilemmas and emotional upheavals, these experiences ultimately fostered a deeper capacity to engage with democracy as a fundamentally contested and dynamic sphere. The transformative power of these encounters lies in their ability to underline that conflict is not inherently destructive but can serve as a fertile ground for constructive dialogue. As one young person observed, the richness of engagement with diverse cultural paradigms ultimately equips young citizens with the resilience and adaptability necessary for fostering a truly democratic society.

3. Education for Peace: Toward a Pedagogy of Democratic Encounter

Emerging from the lived narratives of young people engaged in political participation is a recurring and powerful motif: the transformative impact of encountering the other. These encounters, situated across formal and informal educational spaces, represent foundational steps in the personal and political development of the individuals involved. The journey often begins with a departure from the familiar, a movement beyond one's immediate social and cultural environment, which allows for the first recognition that there is an other beyond the self. This initial displacement, seemingly simple, is in fact a radical pedagogical gesture: it disrupts the taken-for-granted nature of one's world and opens a space for relational and cognitive reorientation.

This process echoes Biesta's (2023) assertion that education, particularly democratic education, must not aim at the mere reproduction of subjectivities aligned with existing norms but rather must cultivate the capacity to engage with the unknown, the unpredictable, and the unfamiliar. To encounter the other in this way is not merely to notice difference; it is to be addressed by it. It is to begin the difficult but necessary work of understanding oneself through the other, a movement that, in educational terms, is profoundly formative. As Bertin and Contini (1983) argue, the concept of difference in education must be understood not as an inventory of diversity, but as a call to transformation: a movement beyond the fixed coordinates of identity into the realm of the possible, the not-yet, the utopian.

The youth involved in the presented study frequently described moments of discovery wherein they realised that the other, initially perceived as distant or radically different, shared unexpected affinities with them. Shared passions, common experiences, or mutual commitments to justice and participation served as bridges across perceived cultural or ideological divides. This recognition of similarity, however, did not erase difference; on the contrary, it made the presence of difference more intelligible, more inhabitable. As Dewey (1938) would suggest, such experiences are fundamentally educational: they allow for growth through the resolution of tension, through the integration of what was previously unassimilated. It is precisely here that the educational value of conflict begins to emerge, not as a violent rupture, but as a space of dialogue, negotiation, and reciprocal transformation. Following Mouffe's (2000, 2005) conception of agonistic pluralism, the participants' narratives reflect a political learning process in which the other is no longer construed as a threat but rather as a legitimate adversary, or even a partner, in a shared democratic endeavour. Conflict, in this view, is not the failure of democratic interaction but its very condition of possibility. What education can and must do, then, is not to shield young people from conflict, but to equip them with the tools to dwell within it, to reflect upon it, and to grow inside it. However, this educational process demands time, space, and a certain quality of relationship, dimensions that are increasingly under pressure in neoliberal educational systems that privilege performance, measurability, and standardisation (Baldacci, 2019). As Fiorucci and Crescenza (2023) point out, education for peace is rooted in the affective and ethical fabric of relationships: it calls for the construction of value-laden connections that enable learners to embrace their own contradictions, and to encounter the contradictions of others without resorting to rejection or retreat. From the interviews, it emerged that the young people needed time to engage, understand, and reflect; time that allowed them to move beyond simplistic judgments or inherited biases and begin to appreciate how others' perspectives are shaped by context, history, and culture. Such recognition aligns with Mortari's (2021) notion of care as a foundational category of educational praxis. In understanding the other not through abstract tolerance but through situated, dialogical engagement, young citizens described developing forms of attentiveness that are deeply ethical: a willingness to remain with discomfort, to interrogate assumptions, and to allow for complexity. This attunement is not an automatic outcome of proximity, but the result of a cultivated readiness to listen, to care, and to question. Education, therefore, must not only provide occasions for encounter but also foster the inner conditions that make those encounters transformative. As Nussbaum (2016) and Hare (1972) remind us, such dispositions, empathy, reciprocity, moral imagination, are not innate, but must be nurtured within a pedagogical framework that values them. Indeed, many of the most impactful moments recounted by participants took place not within traditional classrooms but in youth organisations, international forums, or informal settings. These spaces offered something often lacking in formal education: a sense of co-agency, a shared responsibility for dialogue, and the freedom to question without the pressure to conform. Importantly, these experiences were not framed as oppositional to school, but as complementary, and herein lies a crucial insight for educational policy and practice. Rather than treating such experiences as peripheral or incidental, educational institutions should recognise their formative potential, not by attempting to absorb or control them, but by opening reflective spaces in which their meanings can be explored.

In this sense, education must itself learn to open up, to rethink its own boundaries, to question its spatial and temporal logics, and to embrace a more expansive understanding of learning as something that occurs across a multiplicity of contexts. As Crescenza (2020) argues, the challenge of contemporary education lies precisely in its capacity to engage with the complexity of the world, to cultivate an ecological sensibility that values not only knowledge, but the interdependence of all

learning relationships. This includes acknowledging that difference, rather than being a problem to be solved, is the very condition for educational and democratic vitality. Thus, the role of education in supporting young people to embrace conflict as a constitutive dimension of democracy begins with the intentional creation of conditions for meaningful encounters with the other. This involves far more than curricular inclusion or policy declarations; it requires a sustained commitment to nurturing environments where critical reflection, dialogical openness, and ethical responsibility can flourish. Such a commitment must resist the instrumentalisation of education for economic or nationalistic ends, and instead return to its deeply humanistic roots: to educate not for conformity or control, but for co-existence and transformation. This relational and dialogical dimension of education resonates with the pedagogical thinking of Carla Rinaldi, who conceives listening as a foundational attitude in the construction of meaningful relationships. For Rinaldi (2021), listening is not merely a technique but an ethical and political disposition that recognises children and young people as active constructors of meaning. Her notion of "relational creativity" highlights how shared interpretation and co-construction of knowledge can generate spaces where differences are not only acknowledged but become catalysts for transformation. This vision reinforces the idea that peace and democratic life cannot be transmitted through predefined models, but must be cultivated through lived, reflective, and dialogical relationships. As the interviews suggest, peace is not the absence of conflict but the ability to remain within it, to move through it, and to grow inside it. To educate for peace, then, is to educate for complexity, for uncertainty, and for the constant renegotiation of meaning. This does not mean abandoning the aspiration to justice or clarity; rather, it means recognising that such aspirations are always forged in dialogue, always situated within a web of relationships, and always conditioned by the presence of others who challenge and expand our understanding of what it means to live together. As Pinto Minerva (2002) reminds us, it is only by rejecting monocultural and hierarchical models of knowledge that education can truly become a space for recognising and cultivating difference as the foundation for shared democratic life.

The testimonies gathered in this research illuminate a pedagogy of encounter: a process through which the recognition of the other, the experience of similarity and difference, and the embrace of conflict coalesce into a democratic subjectivity marked by openness, reflexivity, and care. If democracy is, as Mouffe (2005) contends, an endless negotiation between plural perspectives, then education must become its training ground, not by simulating consensus, but by making space for dissent, for disruption, and for the difficult but generative work of coexistence. Only then can young people move beyond mere tolerance of the other, and instead embrace living with the other, thereby contributing to the constant revitalization of democracy from the ground up.

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