

The Contemporary Engagement of Young People in France: Normative Injunctions, Institutional Programs, and the Multiplying Forms of Grouping

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Abstract: The essay deals with the new injunctions coming from the political world as a result of a widely shared feeling that makes us see younger generations as prone to egoism and indifferent to the plight of others, which would inevitably cause the young to display no interest in things public. These haunting claims about the alarming civic apathy come from a generation for whom engagement meant duration, steadiness, and devotion to some group defending general interests, and who took their personal success within these organization the ideal type of militancy. On the other hand, these invitations to take part to social life are caused by the ancient fear of extreme and violent forms of occupying the public space – during riots and other forms of urban violence, rallies and manifestations, etc. Therefore, such invitations point to the necessity to channel the inclination to protest by the young, and to transform it into positive energy for participation by means of institutional programs controlled by the adult world. The article is focussed upon some of these numerous plans, that have been recently established and / or rearranged, insisting both on the philosophies underpinning them and on what capacities and abilities they require of the young. In order to do this, it will be necessary to indicate the social conditions that have allowed this appeal to engagement to emerge. These plans are part of a slow transformation of the place of youth in France, but also of public policy, of the definition of citizenship, and – last but not least – of the role attributed to civil society.

Keywords: Young generation, public space, public policy, citizenship, civil society

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What is new about the new forms of engagement

If one is to understand the meaning of the recent development of new forms of engagement among adolescents and young people, one has to mark the two elements that characterize them. On the one hand, the novelty consists of the fact that people in government, local politicians, administrative agents, and associational leaders encourage the young to come up as bearers of personal and associative projects, to engage as good citizens, to show interest for political life, and to display a full participation to civil society. The related semantics concerning youth participation is based upon four key-words: autonomy, project, engagement, and responsibility. Such an exhortation is no sheer discourse. Far from it. It becomes real through multiple institutional programs.

On the other hand, it's been apparent that the young have invested in these new programs made to prompt their engagement, by conceiving of other forms of grouping, sometimes less institutional, less connected to the traditional political and militant engagement, decidedly open to civil society, and mostly constituted by their peers only. The novel character of such engagement as we will consider in this essay is certainly engendered by the convergence of a new injunction on the part of adults and the multiplying forms of participation to civil society by the young.

As a matter of fact, historians of youth know that accounts of young people in the XX century have constantly teetered between fear and hope: the young were viewed as rebels as well as they were depicted as passive subjects (Passerini, 1996), thereby being alternatively held responsible for destroying the social bond with their wild violence, or regarded as the co-founders who would lay the ground of a new society, thanks to their alleged messianic virtues (Cicchelli and Merico, 2001 ; Cicchelli-Pugeault and Cicchelli, 2005). The title of an old American article published during the 1960s conveys all the adult incapacity to grasp the young reality outside of the above rhetoric: *Hope or despair?* (Porter, 1965) : that was the obsessive question concerning the future of a world that would be governed by the new juvenile values. Nowadays, after having been considered for a long time as a danger to control (“the young danger”) – and this representation has never totally disappeared, just think of the turmoil of November 2005 – youth has come to be seen as a population to protect (with the notion of adolescents at risk), before recently becoming

human capital to invest in to face the unpredictability and uncertainty characterising contemporary society.

For its part, the multifaceted investment in the public space was born of the decline affecting those traditional modes of membership and social inscription as were political parties, unions, and other so-called groups “of general interest” (think tanks, popular education movements): these classic focuses of political socialization have lost much of their appeal among the young through the years, and they were not replaced by other institutions. Above all, however, what seems to have declined is the way people are connected with these agencies of socialization and regulation. A certain militant style that was typical of French modernity has been devalued (Ion, Franguiadakis et Viot, 2005), in favour of more ephemeral, punctual, and elective forms of participation. The emerging movements in the fields of world justice, ecology, human rights; big meeting events like the World Youth Days; the defence of great public causes; the persistence or even growing diffusion of protest participation – petitions, strikes, street manifestations – (Muxel, 2001) thus demonstrates that the presence in the public space is a strong characterising trait of the young condition. “A true socialization to social protest and to the concrete expression of one’s disappointment” really exists (Bréchon, 2001, p. 68). Young people are more similar than it is usually said to adults and elderly people as regards the political sphere, but they develop a less conformist, more critical, perhaps more instrumental attitude toward this domain. The design of their engagements is certainly more pragmatic (Ion, 2005a).

Contrary to what one might superficially think, the appeal to engagement and the multiplication of forms of participation among the youth don’t make up contradictory instances. The new injunction coming from the political world is the result of a widely shared feeling that makes us see younger generations as prone to egoism and indifferent to the plight of others, which would inevitably cause the young to display no interest in things public. These haunting claims about the alarming civic apathy of the young can be explained in two ways. First, it is likely that associational, union, and political leaders are simply getting it wrong. They belong to a generation for whom engagement meant duration, steadiness, and devotion to some group defending general interests – which of course did not exclude the possibility of having companions, or to criticize leaders on the part of the constituency – and who took their

personal success within these organization the ideal type of militancy; which is false, since travelling on board of a group for life has always been only the choice of minorities (Ion, 2005*b*). On the other hand, these invitations to take part to social life are caused by the ancient fear of extreme and violent forms of occupying the public space – during riots and other forms of urban violence, rallies and manifestations, etc. Therefore, such invitations point to the necessity to channel the inclination to protest by the young, and to transform it into positive energy for participation by means of institutional programs controlled by the adult world.

We will focus our attention upon some of these numerous plans, that have been recently established and / or rearranged, insisting both on the philosophies underpinning them and on what capacities and abilities they require of the young. In order to do this, it will be necessary to indicate the social conditions that have allowed this appeal to engagement to emerge. These plans are part of a slow transformation of the place of youth in France, but also of public policy, of the definition of citizenship, and – last but not least – of the role attributed to civil society.

The social conditions of existence of a discourse about engagement for the French youth

Too hurried historians would rush to indicate 2001 as the starting date of this political fancy for youth participation. Granted, that year the now famous White Book was published, following a large consultation of European youth. Taking advantage of the questions asked by young people, that text recommended the adoption of programmes to spur their participation to civil society. The importance of such an initiative is not to be questioned, which is witnessed by the large number of those who later tried to take the credit of it. However, if one strives for a better understanding of the conditions of admissibility of such a report, and wants to avoid confusion between the political decisions and the slow social transformations that have made them possible, one needs to turn to three simultaneous changes that made the propositions expressed in that book favourably accepted in France. Furthermore, we will deal with the emergence of the notion of individualisation of biographies in this country

and in the great State reports on youth, without which the idea of plan – that lies at the heart of these institutional arrangements – wouldn't make any sense. We will reconstruct the path that led some policies to use the recommendations of the European Commission included in the White Book to plan a series of initiatives which took a distance from the traditional bulk of the national public policy of youth. The plan to make young people to be partners of the reconstruction of the social bond – by their own impulse to participation – must be paralleled by profound, independent changes in the definition of citizenship and in the place reserved to civil society. This is why the genealogy of the slow changes of political and administrative rhetoric – in what it recommends, urges to do, and sanctions – must cross the genealogy of the way French society has come to include a new definition of citizenship, one that is more oriented to protest and participation. Therefore, this first context aims to understanding the interaction between two social rationales that are originally distinct, but have converged to create new plans for youth participation to civil society (Cicchelli, 2004).

The individualisation of biographies in the State reports on youth

Two reports, that resulted from the work of two different commissions, allow to follow the attempt that was made in France to assess existing public policies, to find new solutions, and to update the operational definitions of youth². The former report indicated that two decades of public policies have shaped youth into a category apart, one that is undergoing serious problems, and have *de facto institutionalised* that particular age in life (Collectif, 2001). This massive and widespread State intervention has surely not exempted families from taking care of the needs and costs connected to schooling and to a faulty access to the labour market (Grignon et Gruel, 1999). For this reason, *institutionalization* and *familization* of youth (Labadie, 2001) are but the two faces of the same phenomenon, namely the extension of the time and forms of the dependence of young people from the collectivity. The expression “big children” has been forged to indicate the fact that young people in France

² They are: the commission *Jeunes et politiques publiques*, chaired by Dominique Charvet, established in 1998 at the *Commissariat général du plan* (Collectif, 2001), and the *Commission Nationale pour l'autonomie des jeunes*, chaired by Jean-Baptiste de Foucault, established in 2001 (Collectif, 2002).

have the family *and* the public administration as interlocutors, socialization and guardian institutions. The political initiative resulting from this report has consisted of a reflection upon the ways to allocate specific resources enhancing autonomy from the family among the young aged 16 to 25 (Collectif, 2002). It is hardly relevant to note here that these propositions have not come true, since their importance lies in clarifying the slow transformation of the way politics looks at youth: the report contains the premises of the current governmental policy, which is all for encouraging young people to make plans, take initiatives and responsibilities. In fact, one of the central ideas of the first report is to sanction the individual right to lifelong formation. In order to increase the equality of the *opportunity* of school success, the report proposed to grant a formative capital to every individual, one that would imply a twenty year long schooling process, but after basic formation would leave it for each individual to decide whether he or she would want to go on studying, or to access the labour market at once – while preserving their credit to be used in the future – or to pursue work and study simultaneously; or again, to shift from one to the other along one's lifespan. This proposal was inspired by a discovery: if the *psycho-social* moratorium that is observed in Europe (Galland et Cavalli, 1993) has the effect to differ the taking of those responsibilities that are typical of the adult age, it has not prevented the young from making informed choices, notably in the domains of school and the university (Cicchelli et Martin, 2004). Contemporary youth must then learn how to make their own way (de Singly, 2000 ; 2004), which entails some capacity of expressing a vision of the future.

Participative citizenship

But if one wants to understand how the political and administrative rhetoric has gradually distanced itself from the issue of the social and professional integration of young people (Schwartz, 1981), by centring its programs upon the duty to participate to social life, one must look at the changes of the meanings of citizenship, and at the emergence of a role attributed to civil society in France³. The distinction between passive and active citizenship, which is quite common in the anglo-saxon literature, is

³ Of course, the programs aimed at social and professional integration of youth have not disappeared. What we study is the emergence of a new frame of reference, coexisting with older conceptions.

spreading in France. The former can be understood as the set of rights and duties defining *a priori* the individuals' membership within the national community; the latter refers to the citizens' participation to the fate of the City, which updates and enacts their membership (Marinetto, 2003). However, such a distinction reveals its invalidity when one realizes that the so-called passive citizenship is the result of social movements and struggles, which in turn are the outcome of a voluntary conception of belonging to a national community. Also, that citizenship which is called active does not come only as a result of individuals' good will, since it is the community that puts forward some means of integration within the body social. Thus, we prefer to speak of three kinds of citizenship, *which are simultaneously active, because they were achieved through voluntary action, and passive, since they are ultimately guaranteed by the collectivity*: the first is of legal-political nature, and circumscribes membership to the community, the *politéia*, by the right to vote and the exercise of such right. The second, on the contrary, refers to social integration, to the fulfilment of the equality that is written in the constitution through the access of citizens of both sexes to dignified living conditions in the fundamental domains of school, work, housing, social security, and health. The third concerns those forms of action that fulfil the aspiration to have a word, the request to be listened to, the support to the development of autonomy, to individual reflexivity and empowerment⁴. The two souls of citizenship – the universalistic and the social – are particularly evident in France (Schnapper, 2002). In the case of youth, these two aspects of citizenship are strictly interwoven: such social facts as the access of underprivileged youngsters to higher education, as well as the rise of second generation young immigrants upfront to the political scene – which have also highlighted inequality, discrimination and exclusion – have been asserted in the name of the equal dignity conferred by membership in the national community, against all diminished forms of citizenship. The young excluded from the labour market, and more particularly those who live in the “sensitive quarters”, have their feet in job insecurity and their heads in the cultural universe of the middle class (Avenel, 2004). They regard professional activity as a

⁴ For an interesting discussion of the polysemic character of this concept and of the difficulties in translating it into French see Le Bossé (2003).

right granted by the common membership in the Nation. The more young people live in dire situations and feel excluded from the self-declared passive citizenship, the more they stand out for it. In the previous example, if the two citizenships reinforce membership to the Nation – membership being indeed the very essence of citizenship (Touraine, 1994) – there are cases in which the former is so dissociated from the latter as to appear damaged, or even rejected by the young: the very widespread discourses over youth crime or over its lack of interest for politics are an excellent example of this. Even though not all commentators share the thesis that young crime has really increased in recent years (Mucchielli, 2004), many political discourses over the young are centred upon the violence they exhibit against society. It is not by chance that some recent essays on citizenship cannot help considering urban violence by the young – as well as other forms of incivility – a threat for a common life in an established peaceful society (Le Pors, 2003 ; Peyrat, 2003). The other danger young people represent for citizenship seems to lie in their indifference towards politics, particularly with regard to electoral abstention. The perception of a malaise concerning politics, allegedly proven by weak participation to unions and political parties, has surely contributed to pave the way for fresh forms of citizenship. The third component of citizenship is more recent. It is to be found on the level of the claims to have a right to speak beyond and outside the sheer experience of voting, in a society which regards itself more and more as an open space, as ancient *Agoras* used to be. Self expression, debate, being consulted, taking care of the City, showing interest for the fate of the global Village (Rebughini, 2004), are all exigencies that transform the meaning of citizenship: nowadays it is regarded not only as the art of governing, but *above all* of being governed. Furthermore, the governed people, both men and women, are now appealing to an element that is traditionally not outstanding in French political thought: civil society (Roman, 1998).

Civil society as a new interlocutor of public authorities

This is not the place to treat exhaustively the way civil society has gradually taken on the characteristics of a trusted interlocutor, then even of a partner that cannot be ignored. I just recall that – contrary to conventional wisdom – public solidarity has never totally deprived civil society of its responsibility (Estèbe, 2001), and that all public policies did not come as the exclusive initiative of the former (Eme, 1996). Nevertheless, it is undoubtedly true this new connection between State and civil society, and the importance the latter has got, has been facilitated by such reforms as decentralisation and the development of the city policy, and by the emergence of the issue of *governance*, dealing with a new articulation between centre and periphery, between rule production and application. Therefore, rather than talking of a disappearing Welfare State and of the market or civil society taking over, it is more appropriate to maintain we are witnessing a profound change of the meaning of the State, which becomes a *coordinator* much more than a *master* (Donzelot e Estèbe, 1994), a mediator of initiatives and a trigger of solidarity.

Civil society has progressively imposed a political agenda and a definition of what pertains to politics, by further producing its own forms of representation and fostering the emergence of new social actors, new forms of association and communication (Sue, 2003). Young civil society has not waited for the European Commission and its white book to expand; it comprises the young and those around them, that is the socio-cultural and sport animators, educators, and mediators. The change then has to be explained with the specificity of new forms of aggregation, ones that are nearer to movements than to institutions, and were born after the political, unionist or religious activism had exhausted the symbolic charge they had kept at least until the end of the 1980s, without thereby totally disappearing. These new forms consist of protest movements acting on the streets as well as on the Internet, of parties, sit-ins, parades. They are fairly unstructured spontaneous movements, at least at the outset, that are strongly expressive and protest oriented, requiring a sporadic and ephemeral participation rather than an unconditional deal. The social forums, the anti-globalization and equitable trade movements, the NGOs for sustainable development or environment protection, are the expression of a civil society professional politics cannot avoid to confront.

What is happening in France has already been observed in other countries (Labadie, 2005): what we are witnessing is a profound mutation of politics, particularly the end of the assimilation of politics with the State and with the political system (Beck, 1998). This is how a fresh conception of democracy emerges, according to which individuals use all the means they have to achieve recognition of new rights, to enforce already existing ones, and to fight for social respect.

Youth as a resource for the future

In the following pages we are going to deal with two kinds of programs: the former are promulgated by the State administrations or the territorial communities, and are explicitly aimed at the activation of youth participation. They are initiated through policy and appear as opportunities offered to the young. They claim to be a response coming from the top to a socially diffused desire of engagement. We classify in this group such programs as the contests named “Will of action”, “Young challenges”⁵, and the various forms of Youth Councils⁶. The second are more related to the individual and / or collective initiatives young people take through voluntary work and the creation of associations. They are rather more an expression of civil society. This taxonomy can be questioned insofar as: (a) youth councils may approach associations in the way they work, without being called associations; (b) there is a report about the development of voluntary work among students (Houzel, 2003) recommending a model of development that may encourage the students’ widespread desire to engage as voluntary workers, entailing the framing of a formal setup and the formal organization of the way voluntary workers are going to be coordinated with professionals acting in the same domains. The same rationale is that of the European Voluntary Service, which is one of the strong points of the European Youth Program (2000-2006)⁷, permitting to the young aged 18-25 to do voluntary work in one of the 31 countries subscribing to this agreement: it is based on the existence of an organized reception, provides health insurance and financial support for the participants offered by the European Commission; it also implies organizing formal procedures to select candidates.

Two contests

In the preceding pages we have learned that a view of youth as a resource, which is advocated by the policy, can dovetail with the appeal to participative and protest oriented citizenship, based in turn upon a strong presence of civil society – which on the contrary is required by the citizens. However, this is not enough to define the impact or the contents of this new adult normativity. We are going to approach these elements

⁵ <http://www.enviedagir.fr/>;

<http://www.jeunesse-sports.gouv.fr/jeunesse/enviedagir.asp>

⁶ <http://www.anacej.asso.fr/>

⁷ http://www.injep.fr/rubrique.php3?id_rubrique=88

through the study of the rules of the game institutionalised by the administrative programs aiming at youth activation and participation. Among the lot of existing programs, we have selected “Young challenges” and “Will of action”.

These contests have rules and systems of assessment that ideally orient the contents of engagement and shape them into a given form, by accepting or rejecting applications for funds (and more generally demanding their reformulation). Since it is logical to think that the projects which get the funds are those tending to conform to the criteria panels are using for assessment, it is therefore necessary to analyze the rhetorical structures appearing in the websites, brochures and other promotion oriented texts. According to a first content analysis of these documents, autonomy appears to be both the starting point of every action and a goal to be pursued by the same action; young people are deemed able to say and witness their own engagement, to recognize themselves in their act, keeping a promise through their projection toward the future. By taking this context into account, we get to the core of the institutional production of a semantics of engagement.

Let us begin by describing the array of institutional programs allowing youngsters to apply with their projects to be evaluated by a panel. These plans have multiplied both on the local and on the national level. “Young challenges” addresses people aged 15 to 28. Since it was established in 1987 it has funded more than ten thousand projects, each of which costs between 1600 € (for minor ones) and 8500 € (for major ones). The program has three goals: to develop the sense of autonomy, responsibility and engagement; to promote self discovery and the discovery of one’s potentialities, creativity and capacities for action; to promote social and professional integration. The official guidelines for assessment indicate that the project must be a challenge to the proposing subjects, have a social utility and a local impact, be innovative, exemplary and durable.

However, it is only since the contest “Will of action” was born, in October 2002, that commentators have begun to speak of a turning point in the government policy aiming at the development of engagement. There are various reasons for this. This program has benefited from intense promotion campaigns, being presented right from the beginning and before any kind of evaluation as the result of a new thought about youth, which would radically change youth policy. “Young challenges” is surely

more selective, demanding, and better funded, but its goal is above all social and professional integration. “Will of action” promotes engagement in the first place. It addresses young people aged 11 to 30, and asks them to apply with projects in the domains of citizenship, culture, sports, environment, solidarity, and humanitarian work. In 2003, funding has reached 600,000 € for “Will of action” and 2,400,000 € for “Young challenges”. The goal declared by the ministry in a circular letter⁸ was to insist in the dialogue with the school and the associations, to act in such a way as to induce the further validation of the funded projects through a school and formative path. Finally, the website “Will of action” continues to play a pivotal role in the program. It allows to access the key information, is presented as the catalysing locus of all offer, and it includes links to more than 10,000 associations and 10,000 projects. The structure of the program proves how big an effort the ministry has made, what kind of competences it requires, and the socialization outcome on which it bets. Above all, it fixes the rules of the game which participants must abide to. The following are relevant factors to see one’s project approved: searching for the relevant information, drawing a project, getting the opportunities, possibly founding an association, imagining a budget, envisaging the steps of the trail, indicating the human investment, building a network, accomplish the self-attributed task and making it public.

Recreating the social bond

In their book dedicated to the new spirit of capitalism, Luc Boltansky and Ève Chiapello (1999) analyse the precepts included in some texts meant for the formation of managers, in order to understand the rhetorical structures featured in this new phase of industrial modernity, such as the importance attributed to networking, to personal initiative, and to flexibility. It is equally possible to make sense of the new adult normativity orienting youth to engagement, by extracting its profile from slogans, websites, handbooks, brochures, and other texts that backed up the promotion of the institutional programs through which the subjects interviewed would go. An exploratory content analysis of these precepts

⁸ B.O. n° 47, December 18, 2003.

<http://www.education.gouv.fr/bo/2003/47/MENE0302768N.htm>

reveals what the new virtues to pursue would be on the individual level: engagement as a promise, with the aim of operating with the Other as the horizon of one's action, and responsibility as keeping one's word. Youngsters enjoy some forms of autonomy permitting them to take initiatives and to obtain logistic and / or financial support that helps fulfil their projects – the fulfilment of which will make the young man or woman more autonomous than they were before. The autonomy of the young is thus an ambivalent virtue, being a strating point as well as a conquest (Ricoeur, 2001). An interview conceded by Claude Capelier, special counsellor of former minister of youth Luc Ferry, who initiated the contest "Will of action", represents a precious witness to this new adult rhetoric of engagement *and* of the goals it pursues⁹. He says young people displayed great initiative and interest for public issues after the result of the second turn of the 2002 presidential elections, when hundreds of thousands boys and girls took to the streets to rally against the risk of a possible, though very unlikely, final victory of the extreme right wing candidate Jean-Marie Le Pen. However, without adequate structures, these spontaneous initiatives are bound to run out of steam. Although he recognizes the existence of young projects, Capelier regrets their dispersion, their lack of consistency and visibility. For this reason, he pleads for a wider impulse leading toward civil society, one that would take stock on the ability of the young to develop a space between the private world – i.e. personal life – and the public world controlled by the State – i.e. education and the school. Moreover, he also addresses the public authorities, asking them to develop some support for the animation, management and mediation concerning these initiatives. This operation would seemingly aim to inform, follow, support, recognize the projects of the young, but it reveals itself much more profoundly as an attempt to heal some wounds they have: «It's way to reconstruct the social bond, and eventually to reconstruct the interest of the young for politics» (ibid., p. 149), whilst averting their strong attraction for violence.

The youth councils

The opportunity to establish some youth councils had already appeared in France at the end of the second World War, but we'll have to wait for

⁹ See number 30 of the journal *Agora Débats/Jeunesses*, 2002, pp. 146-151.

the 1970s and the 1980s to see some more numerous, permanent and durable initiatives. If, however, we consider the most ancient among them, it is not before the late 1990s that this assemblies become a central factor in the common dialogue promoted on the political level with the aim to reconcile these youngsters with the institutions, to invite them to come up with concrete proposals for improving their living conditions. In 1998, former minister of youth and sports Marie-George Buffet declared to be convinced that her ministry would have to take care of satisfying the increasing demand of the young to express their *desiderata* and to participate in their fulfilment. She said that based on the propositions issued by the young during a national consultation that had taken place one year before. But to accomplish that mission it would have been necessary to bring about a modernisation of the administration, which continued to regard the young as a user to distrust rather than as a responsible citizen. She made a wish that this first step made by the institutions would contribute to remove the discriminations suffered by the young (Becquet, 2002a). The task assigned to the councils, composed of people aged 16 to 26, is essentially advisory and incentive. They could propose solutions that could improve the plight of the young in various domains: the labour market, education and orientation, access to culture and leisure, and health, the struggle for equal opportunity, equality and citizenship, against discriminations, *etc.* It was expected that these councils would take care of coordinating and controlling concrete actions, like meetings on the local level, festivals of citizenship, debates, exhibitions, information campaigns, in collaboration with and on demand from existing organizations and associations. A remarkable number of Local Councils of Youth exist, established at the initiative of mayors; 99 Departmental Councils of Youth, whose chair is the prefect, composed of the members of the local councils and of local associations; a National Council of Youth, chaired by the minister of Youth and sports and composed by the members of Departmental councils, of associations, parties or unions. The establishment of these councils has been a tremendous “political intuition” (Becquet, 2002b), and has allowed to articulate a “young governance” (Vulbeau, 2002, p. 107); young people can define the profile of a territorial civic qualification. A relative parity emerges between the status of young and adult, by integrating the former within a social space where different generations coexist.

Yet, whilst these forums are of great interest as places of apprenticeship of participative democracy and of political socialization outside the family, various problems remain on the ground. On one hand, these councils have been more and more deserted, probably as a result of poor visibility and of the impatience young people showed to transform their propositions into action as rapidly as possible. On the other hand, doubts were raised as to their capacity to influence political decisions: the lack of resources raised further complaints, and fear was expressed that the program would prove to be ineffective, due to the fragmentation of youth policy among different ministries – which brought some politicians to wish for inter-ministry dialogue. As regards the councils of children and youngsters, which have been developed for some years now, they are around 1,200, and address people of age 9 to 18 (more rarely up to 25). Their tasks are ultimately very similar to those of the Youth councils, the difference between them lying in the fact that the former have the administration and the prefect as their interlocutors, while the latter are created by the initiative of the mayors and of the locally elected deputies, and look like association, though they have a different statute. The councils of children and youngsters can be defined as agencies of secondary socialization, which assumes that participants share a certain degree of political competence. The young elected are considered to be actors who have a specific experience, which legitimates their capacity of intervention. However, it should not be forgotten that these would-be citizens conduct participative actions within the framework of a new pedagogic injunction of self-expression (Vulbeau, 2002). Besides, the success of the expression “promotion of citizenship”, that was used to describe these initiatives, leads to credit them with pure neutrality. But behind their seeming unity of intentions those promoting such initiatives conceal very different conceptions of the capacities young people can exhibit, and ultimately of their place within the community, which are only revealed by careful analysis of the discourse of political actors (Koebel, 2000)¹⁰. Four models have been observed. The former does not endow the young with any capacity to exert their power, not even on the advisory level. Should the young really participate to political life, first

¹⁰ Another study shows that young participants to these programs may vary in different cities, notably depending by the «convergence between the local styles of public action and the will to affirm citizenship on the part of ethnic minorities» (Loncle, 2002, p. 147).

they are supposed to show respect for such values as homeland, nation, and flag. These discourses are typical of self-declared extreme right wing deputies. A second model is characterised by a weak recognition of the political capacity among children and young people, and by the will to increase the awareness of the council members of the mechanisms of democracy and the way the town hall works. This discourse glorifies the virtues of initiation and *in vivo* apprenticeship of civic education, believing that young people should practice a lot before being able to access some real responsibilities. It's a model typical of the policies claiming for a right wing identity. A third model recognizes to the young a certain capacity of intervention in municipal debates. Here it's about consulting the young on subjects concerning them, even though the actual realization of the projects is rarely ever taken into consideration. The young would provide professional politicians with some additional knowledge of reality. These are mayors who never belonged to any party. One last model is expressed by some locally elected deputies, who take the young as partners, recognizing them a great capacity of intervention in debates as well as of realization of projects. Here young people are regarded as the bearers of an original worldview about their environment that adults don't have, or have no more. These are mainly left wing mayors.

It is possible to assess the political success of these programs with respect to two considerations. On one hand, public policies for the young are becoming more and more local (Loncle, 2000). On the other hand, these programs are now to be seen within the wider framework of local democracy, where they grant a political profit to the mayors just like the fight against crime or environment protection. For example, let us consider the proposed meaning of the incentive to establish some neighbourhood councils. In this case, it becomes clearer that the alleged goal is to serve the citizens, to bring them closer to politics by developing discussion and dialogue. As Christian Le Bart (2003a) has noted, the neighbourhood councils allow their promoters to anticipate possible criticism to their intentions, since they are presented as advisory forms. However, advising doesn't mean consulting, and even less deciding. Despite their claims to the contrary, mayors still seem to be deeply fond of three monopolies that underpin their status: the claim to be speaking *in the name* of the local society (monopoly of representation); the claim to be

speaking *of* the local society (monopoly of competence); the claim to *decide for* the local society (monopoly of decision) (Le Bart, 2003b). We won't embrace Le Bart's radical conclusion that neighbourhood councils are the result of strategies oriented to infusing an institutional and media-related fictitious life into a local democracy which is really neutralised from the point of view of political decisions. Nonetheless, we cannot help pointing out that, within the framework of our youth councils, the socialization to civic engagement is accomplished while still avoiding the essential question concerning any assembly debate: the political character of the choices to be made. What is the meaning of an *agora* without *agone*? Does a place where people can express their opinions without having the power to decide represent the path to thread to form the youth to citizenship and participation? In her research about youth and high-school councils, Valérie Becquet (2005, p. 126) shows very well that – in spite of the participants' good will – «young people and high school teens experience both the possibility to discuss with their interlocutors and the difficulty, if not the impossibility, to see their requests succeed», which calls into question the very idea of a dialogue among the partners.

Outside the most recent programs: associations and voluntary work

Associations have existed for a long time in France; however, they are currently being rediscovered, flattered and encouraged by local and national politicians alike. They seem to have stepped beyond the republican legacy, which had always granted them an all-too ambivalent place (Ion, 1996), and are now considered adequate to confront the alleged malaise of modernity, particularly the deterioration of the social bond. In order to contrast the tendency of social relations to become sheer contracts, some recommend the development of associative membership, as an indicator of lively social relationships, altruism, and sociability. It is then quite understandable that research about youth and associations accumulates, after a long period of indifference (Roudet, 1996). These studies show the young have never given up their involvement with certain forms of collective organization (Roudet et Tchernia, 2001): associational membership is as common among people aged 18 to 29 as it is in the average of the French population (i.e. roughly 40 %). Nevertheless, if this form of belonging still has some appeal it is because it never stopped changing, notably leaving more and more place to personal implication, though still integrating individuals within chosen collectivities permitting them to “support their identities” (Vermeersch, 2004). Associations display a new form of articulation between individual and collective. The multiplying values allowing the participants to express their engagement in a shared language doesn’t mean there aren’t shared values at all. «The individualization of one’s relation to values doesn’t mean the values are themselves individualised (...); the horizon of associational engagement is constituted by a wish for social participation which is both a wish for social relationships and for membership in collectivities of variable dimensions» (Vermeersch, 2004, p. 707).

The inquiries about the values of the French allow to confirm these results: associations prevail that are oriented to personal fulfilment; far from decreasing, the attitude to take responsibilities within the associations is growing; multiple membership is declining, leaving room to a prevailing investment in one association only; friendly sociability is on the rise (Roudet, 2001). Self-fulfilment comes to the fore as a reason of engagement within small elective groups through a possibly strong personal involvement, not excluding some distance, critique and exit. Mobilisation privileges clearly limited goals, that can lead to immediate results. Individual self-fulfilment, saving one's strong autonomy, shows that unconditional involvement is generally leaving room to elective participation, one that is punctually and immediately gratifying (Lapeyronnie, 2005). Other research confirms the numerous facts headed in this direction. Jacques Ion (2005a) also points out that engagement among young people is something taking place in the present, without evoking a wider temporal horizon: struggles are to be fought here and now, not needing any legitimation by ideologies that promise a shining future. It is rather by the fear of a less promising future that current struggles are prompted. Utopias do not disappear for good, but are sort of kept apart, whilst the values they bear inspire actions in the present: it's sort of a "pragmatic idealism". Furthermore, the same author highlights the way associates seem to give priority to horizontal and egalitarian networks over vertical and hierarchic ones. This fits in with the strong, often noted tendency to reject delegating one's word and to speak in one's own name.

The relation to time and to internal hierarchy are hardly the only elements of engagement to have changed. Engagement goes beyond the interest for public affairs, for participation to the fate of the City, and tends to become an “existential need” (Lapeyronnie, 2005, p. 53). Actually, the psycho-social moratorium (Galland, 2000) can no more lean back on institutional mechanisms providing individuals with a sufficiently stable framework within which one can manage his or her apprenticeship of adult life and experiment with it. It becomes more difficult for individuals to delegate their engagement, since they are required to take a stand and choose. Engaging then becomes part of a «personal responsibility, insofar as the socialization process becomes ever weaker and more disarticulated. For young people nowadays it is a matter of engaging in order to be more fully individuals» (Lapeyronnie, 2005, p. 53). In a currently ongoing analysis which is part of an inquiry into young people’s participation to programs “Will of action” and “Young challenges” (Cicchelli, 2006), we explore the rationale of the meanings attributed to these contests, that appeals to the dialectics of engagement (interpreted as a promise) and of responsibility (the promise kept). Now to say promise and promise kept is to trace a temporal arch that opens the door to many risks: betrayal of promises, failure, delay. The Ricoeur inspired narrative identity serves here to understand how the actor identifies with his or her project, embodies it, stands out for it, and makes it public. We then start from a minimalist and humble definition of the promise and its keeping, avoiding to reify engagement through the observation of the back and forth between imagined questions, the problems posed, the possible solutions, the changes of the project, until its final outcome.

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