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Young people and politics: disconnected, sceptical, an alternative, or all of it at the same time? (1)

This article discusses the need of overcoming the wide-spread simplistic notions about political life of young people in our societies, introducing a more complex view of the situation, taking into account new conditions of youth's life and the plurality of meanings that converge in their political universes. Therefore, after critically reviewing some theoretical and analytical assumptions on which negative diagnoses are based, we will reflect on what it means to be young in late modernity and how life experiences develop within the dialectics of integration and autonomy that dominate social dynamics of youth. Some empirical evidences about political attitudes of young people, Spanish and European, show the varied relations between different groups of young people in the field of politics and, as a consequence, the complexity of young people's political life, which does not allow for one-dimensional lines of argument (be they favourable or unfavourable for the young people themselves). Instead of arguing about whether today's youth is disconnected, sceptical, or, on the contrary, is an alternative, we should start thinking that most of the young people are those three things at a time.

Key words: relation between youth and politics, social dynamics of young people, political universes, political attitudes.

Usual negative perception of youth's political life

We seem to be obliged to start analyses about young people and politics again and again mentioning the usual negative view of the relation of young people, at least during the last three or four decades, to politics. The conception of uninterested and passive young people in terms of their relation to politics has become predominant in the social discourse, as far as becoming one of hallmarks of today's youth identities. This perception sometimes seems unanimous among the public opinion, and also has its counterpart in the field of academic researches, where analyses about disaffection and lack of interest of the young people or about their low readiness to participate in political life in democratic societies by using the instruments designed in order to fulfil that task are predominant. However, if we ask ourselves about the assumptions sometimes taken as a fact and the types of analysis carried out, we should not be willing to accept the conclusions as something evident, some of these ideas may be doubted.

For the last few years, sociology of youth, especially after the popularization of post-structuralism, has insisted on the pluralization of the routes that lead young people to adult life and on the internal diversity that characterizes youth in today's society. However, both characteristics are not present in most explanations developed to understand political life of young people, their discourses, interests, behaviours, etc. Whatever element is emphasized,

the main arguments are usually common. Most of the young people seem to relate to the world of politics in a uniform way, distant and distrustful, surrounded by a tangle of structural and institutional factors out of reach for their own decision-making. Researchers repeatedly use a metaphor to refer to young people at the beginning of the 21. Century: They are sailors in sea of uncertainty, negotiating their own way through the storm, surrounded by opportunities and risks; When it comes to politics this metaphor is substituted by the view of young men and women passively assuming a political universe filled with negative and pessimistic meanings. Only a small minority escapes this scenario, only because they are exposed to very specific processes of socialization.

Therefore, there is a clear predominance of generic assumptions, where the main factor of inner differentiation is age, understood as a stage of the life cycle in evolutionary terms, or as generational criteria. In both cases, social, cultural or ideological heterogeneity of young people and the processes to become a full member of society play a secondary role as an explaining factor for political positions of the new generations, which tend to be assessed from a moral point of view, more than form a socio-political perspective. In this sense, it is also important to highlight the usual absence of an intergenerational perspective that would help understanding the characteristics of young people's political life in relation to what citizens of the rest of generations think and do. Young people are not isolated from the social and political context where relations between different generations are developed.

Further review of the mentioned assumptions tells us that in order to understand many academic explanations about political positions of young people; we should focus on three aspects that are considered fundamental. First, numerous approaches of the researches in this field are based on a conception of politization with individualistic roots that conceives youth as a stage of instability and undefined biographies; and politics as the field of expression of individual interests. From this point of view, youth's lack of interest regarding political issues is justified to a certain extent, as forced consequence of their peripheral situation in the social network. As the young people carry out their transitions to adult life and socially integrate they will gradually become more interested in politics, as decisions taken there will start to affect their interests. Lastly, politization is interpreted as a basically individual phenomenon, influenced by a series of external factors that translate into a series of explicit behaviours (Benedicto 2004a). Regarding this position, main worries of experts are directed to quantify the activities that are carried out instead of focusing on the contents and meanings of political participation of young people.

Second, in too many occasions we forget the context of transformation of political attitudes in developed societies; logically, this context affects all generations, adults as well as young people. Citizens of democratic societies relate to each other in politics with very different premises in comparison to the predominant premises of previous decades. During the 50's and 60's trust in representative institutions and in the corresponding authorities was very high, but decades later all modern democracies face the deterioration of trust in political leaders and parties, together with more scepticism towards the results of the political system, all of which is on the basis of political disaffection that characterizes today's situation (Pharr & Putnam, 2000).

The need to take into account new social, institutional and cultural conditions where political life develops is also present in the third of the aspects I want to highlight. Citizens, in general, and particularly new generations face experiences with regard to politics that question traditional meanings and expressions, while new forms of relation appear; these new forms of relations are sometimes wrongly interpreted as rejecting or abandoning collective commitments. The transformation of the predominant model of young people's political commitment can be a good example of how forms of politization change in accordance to the changes that also affect social and collective experiences of young people. The crisis of the model of militant activism based on political parties and its substitution by very different forms of commitment, very specific and sporadic forms, in multiple fields (from traditional forms of political activity to forms linked to civic solidarity or other forms related to new spaces of youth expression), reflects cultural characteristics of young people in the present (individualism, orientation towards consumption), as well as their tight relations to their everyday experiences and interests (Funes, 2006).

Therefore, before going on with the analysis, we should briefly think about what it means to be young in late modernity and about the dynamic processes that affect life experiences and promote different routes towards adulthood. Only by knowing more about how young people experience their youth, we will be able to start understanding a little bit more about how they shape their relation to the world of political meanings and expressions.

Social dynamics of youth: between integration and autonomy

The traditional interpretation of youth as a period of transition where a complex process of changes takes place that allows young people to acquire the status of adults has accustomed us to understand youth from a lineal and evolutionary perspective, with a beginning defined by negative terms and an end defined by positive terms. The beginning of the transition would be the situation of a child or teenager, dependent in all aspects of his family and/or the social institutions. The end would correspond, on the contrary, to young emancipated men and women that have become adults thanks to the economic, residential and affective independence they have acquired. In much more conventional terms, we could describe transition to adulthood as the process in which young people leave their parents' home and create a new home; thanks to their participation in the labour market they obtain enough income to lead an independent life and start more or less stable couple relationships, creating a new family unit.

In this lineal and evolutionary view, which according to Bontempi (2003) corresponds to the youth condition that characterizes first modernity, emancipation represents the culmination of the transition to adulthood, social acknowledgement as free individuals, able to manage life projects and assume responsibilities as members of society. Through emancipation, young people leave youth in order to socially become adults and citizens, two terms that become equivalents.

Many sociologists emphasize the events that define youth emancipation, such as having a paid job, an own house, a new family relation, and even having children, which hides, or at least makes it difficult to aim for the true objective of these processes, which is nothing else but achieving integration

of people into a social organization, establishing a social position from where to develop their biographical project. From this point of view, original dependences are not significant, what is significant is where they will arrive and how they do it. Therefore, youth can be interpreted as the process of acquisition of the resources needed to integrate into a social organization and assume new dependences and responsibilities. According to Garrido and Requena (1996: 15), "socially, and always from this perspective, the behaviour of young people can be interpreted as access to or integration into forms of life that precede them and require adaptation or adjustment (...) When a young person integrates, he is no longer a young person. But at the same time, he assumes new commitments that are as strong as or even stronger than what he knew from the situation in his family of origin".

This change of emphasis from emancipation towards integration in my opinion means to redirect the debate from concerns about the moment in time of youth emancipation to the conditions of integration into the world of adults for young people. In Spain, for example, as well as in other European countries, above all southern European countries, there are frequent debates about the age when young people leave the family home, and the social and political repercussions of this fact. It is also true that, according to Eurostat, in countries like Spain and Italy, we have to wait until the age of 30 and 31, respectively, to be able to say that 50% of the males no longer live in their parent's home; on the contrary, in Great Britain, Germany or France the age when they leave their parent's home is around 24.

However, the fact that young people leave the family home sooner or later tells us little about the difficulties to carry out successful transitions, the strategic character of staying at the parent's home for many young people as a way to accumulate social capital or about the problems of leaving the family home to early for certain social groups – especially females with low qualifications. The new dynamics of youth in late modernity, with temporary processes and a growth of uncertainty and risks, requires reducing the centrality of emancipation, understood as the independence form external demands and obligations, if we want to avoid, as López Blasco (2005) warns, the risk of many young people, and especially the more disadvantaged people, being left behind by the social institutions. Therefore, the most important thing will be to study how structural conditions influence the processes of emancipation, the different decisions they adopt and the type of social integration they achieve.

To sum it up, one of the ways of thinking of young people is from the point of view of integration into the world of adults, the adaptation to the demands of a social organization where young people look for a social position, assuming a series of personal and collective responsibilities. In spite of the growing importance of youth in the development of an individual's biography and the fact that we tend to think about the world of youth and the world of adults as two opposing moments of life, we cannot forget that the pressure to achieve one form or another of integration into the world of adults is always present in the decisions and behaviours of the new generations in several different fields of life: In the filed of labour, as well as in terms of affective relationships, or in politics, it is possible to identify this trend that forces them to adapt to the obligations of the social order in order to integrate in the best conditions possible, becoming a regular member of the community.

But the need to integrate into the world of adults is nothing more than one of the faces of youth; the other face is achieving autonomy, the capacity and the competences needed to manage their life projects. The transformations initiated during the 80's and developed since them have shown the necessity of integrating a more complex view of youth, where structure and agency influence each other. As graphically shown by Evans and Furlong (1997), the metaphor of the niches, the routes or the trajectories used to designate the processes of transition to adult roles have been replaced by the metaphor of the navigation during the 90's. This new metaphor refers to the need of individuals of making an assessment of the existing risks and opportunities in order to achieve the capability of negotiating their own way through a sea full of uncertainty. The relation between structural and individual factors becomes the key to understand how biographical trajectories of young people develop, as well as their deep diversity.

The break of linearity in transitions and its substitution through uncertain paths, vulnerable and reversible (Walter et al.), together with the longer periods needed to achieve definite integration into the adult world, has transformed the conditions of youth. Instead of talking about a temporary period, with clearly defined objectives, youth becomes a life condition, a fundamental change in the development of individual's biographies, where experiences are collected and new types of relation experienced, and new assessment structures and new behaviour are tried out, in the personal, as well as in the collective field. Again referring to Marco Bontempi (2003: 31), we can say that "more than a state of moratorium, typical for transition processes, now youth assumes, which in a certain way is paradoxical, the characteristics of a phenomenon that finds the assumptions for their own development and definition in itself".

The new conditions in which young people live their life and their processes of transition have allowed establishing a key distinction between independence (understood in terms of the material situation) and autonomy (understood in terms of competence and capacity). There are two different processes that currently follow two also different logics. The step from economic dependence to economic independence that in the past constituted the previous step to achieve individual autonomy is currently not a requisite to live as an autonomous individual, capable of taking decisions and making the most adequate choices for the future. On the contrary, the uncertain environment where young people live today creates situations of semi-dependence, in other cases economic independence is temporary and reversible due to constant entries and exits of the labour market and, lastly, we also encounter many young people that, although being economically dependent of their family of origin, have conquered high levels of autonomy and individual freedom in significant fields of their life, such as affective relationships, consumption patterns, life-styles or collective behaviours, etc.

Building and achieving autonomy, understood as the capacity of dealing with life-projects, therefore becomes the main objective of this long period of life. The young people themselves corroborate this fact; according to different researches (Arnett, 1997; Westberg, 2004), they consider that becoming an adult is linked to acquiring responsibilities regarding their own decisions and not to having completed the different transitions (labour, housing, family), except when they have their own children. But what really is the most important thing to understand is that this process to achieve autonomy is currently carried out in a context of relations of dependence in which young

people develop their life and which is, undoubtedly, conditioned by structural factors that can turn opportunities into risks, or vice versa. The importance of this struggle for autonomy in the young people's life also turns youth into a period of frequent experimentation. Longer periods of family dependence, relative lack of responsibilities and, above all, the plurality of life situations young people face leads them to try out and develop new forms of social relations, new approaches and patterns in several fields of life, such as consumption, work, politics, or family life. This experimentation, in many occasions, doesn't result in significant events, being limited to be a distinctive characteristic of a minority of young people; but in other occasions it constitutes the seed of important processes of change that explain some of the deepest transformations of social life during the last years. New forms of family coexistence, active acceptance of behaviours such as homosexuality, different forms of political consumption or massive use of information technologies (IT) as an instrument for interpersonal relations are some of the examples of phenomena that started as distinctive elements of a minority youth sub-culture –most of them were transgressors in one way or the other of majority's social norms– to later spread around society, creating a deep reformulation of the system of values and the predominant behaviour patterns in our societies.

Therefore, integration and autonomy constitute two essential dimensions to understand the social dynamics of youth, in general terms, as well as in different fields of young people's life. The analysis of the dialectic relation of both elements in every historical moment, the factors that act to favour relative importance of one or the other element, and how they interact with each other in different social, cultural and political contexts provides fundamental information on how to understand what it means to be young under certain circumstances and to identify the rhythm of change of the condition of youth.

Political attitudes of young (Spanish) people

As should be clear by now, this double perspective of integration and autonomy is also very useful to analyze political life of young people. The pressure to achieve integration in the adults' world of politics, together with the search for new political expressions, appropriate to the contexts of experience and participation of young people, form framework of multiple layers where different relations of different groups of young people with politics gain sense (Muxel, 2001).

It is precisely in this field of persistence and change where we have to locate the young people's attitudes with regard to political activities carried out in accordance to institutionally established procedures and their attitudes regarding that other type of political activities that use different instruments, albeit not institutionally regulated, but after many years of use "normalized" expression of the presence of young people in the field of public decisions, as well as their preferences and demands. Unlike what it would seem at first glance, when we start to analyze available evidences we see that political attitudes of young people are not controlled by a single pattern that leads to rejection and lack of interest towards the institutions and the authorities, and we can't speak of depolitization as an unmistakeable characteristic of today's youth. Without a doubt the situation is quite a lot more complex than what some people want us to believe through superficial analyses of the results of

the surveys. According to several experts (Norris, 2002), we are facing lower levels of formal political commitment of young people; but, however, these low levels are balanced out through significant growth of their presence in other types of non conventional activities that are more in accordance with their way of experiencing collective life, such as protest movements, participation in volunteering, use of internet as an instrument of political activation, etc. Nevertheless, we have to admit that political issues tend to take a secondary position when it comes to young people's concerns, as it corresponds to this stage of modernity, characterized by intense processes of individualization and by the decline of the main socialization institutions.

They cannot let themselves be pushed around by appearance, and admitting the complexity of the situation seems evident, but we need to confirm it with statistical information. The case of Spain is a good example of this complexity and of the uselessness of simplified interpretations when it comes to assess political life of young people. Although I'm well aware of the fact that political opinions of young people in surveys are not much more than a thin, simplified reflection of their complex political life, and underlining that it is not my intention to carry out a deep analysis of the political attitudes of young Spanish people, I will now highlight some of the characteristics that are more distinctive in order to empirically prove the previous statement on the inexistence of a single or predominant pattern of rejection towards politics, as part of the media and several opinion leaders want us to believe.

Every analysis about this issue, be it as shallow as it may be, should take the context where these attitudes gain meaning into account. On the one hand, we refer to the first generations that were completely socialized in democracy. They are young people that start to access politics in a time when the democratic system has already achieved a considerable level of stability, the system of political parties revolves around two main parties, the conservatives and the social-democrats, as it is the case in other European countries; and the welfare system, developed during the 80's, begins to show evident results (social benefits, universal education and comprehensive health care system). But on the other hand, this generation of young people has been socialized in a political culture with high levels of political disaffection and where participation has not enough incentives to break up with the tradition of passivity and anti-political feeling inherited through the dictatorship. Also, for the last ten years, Spanish political life has faced difficult moments due to scandals of corruption in the mid 90's, territorial conflicts and high levels of political confrontation during the last years of the conservative government and the today's socialist government. (Benedicto, 2004b); Morán, 1997)

Together with these circumstances that are specifically derived from history and Spanish politics, we cannot forget the importance of cultural meanings for young people's political life in Western democracies. If something defines the Spanish case that is its fast access to the predominant ideological and cultural trends in Western Europe. When we compare information about young Spanish people, as well as Spanish adults, with information of neighbouring countries, logically, some specific differences appear with regard to certain aspects, but similarities are much more common (Bonet, Martín & Montero, 2006). Young Spanish people can show less interest for certain topics than most Europeans, or express more liberal opinions regarding the existing social order; but, generally, we can say they

experience politics in very much the same way as the rest of young people of other European countries (Bettin, 2001).

To sum it up, we can highlight four basic characteristics of the political attitudes of young Spanish people, in accordance to the data of different surveys carried out by the Spanish Youth Institute and the Centre for Sociological Researches (2). In order to prove similarities and differences in comparison with other European countries we will use statistical information provided by the international comparative research EUYOUPART (Political Participation of Young People in Europe - Development of Indicators for Comparative Research in the European Union) (3). This research surveyed around 8,000 young people between 15 and 24 years old from eight countries of the European Union. Spain was not among them.

The first of these characteristics refers to the centrality and legitimacy of democracy in the political universe of young people. In spite of the deficiencies of how the political system works and the problems that have been appearing –which I mentioned earlier– democracy as a governmental system shows a high level of legitimacy among young people: 8 out of 10 of the young people between 15 and 29 consider democracy better than any other form of government, only 5% admits authoritarian solutions (constant through all age groups) and 11% expresses indifference. Most interesting is the low importance of authoritarian solutions not only among young people in the present, but also among previous generations. Since the beginning of the 90's, the distribution of opinions doesn't show significant variations, with a similar distribution among the adult population and young people (del Moral, 2003). Also, according to several researches carried out, the legitimacy of democracy is not linked to the social position of the interviewee or the satisfaction with regard to how democracy works. This last fact is especially relevant, as one of the most frequent concerns among experts when they study regimes that had to face a process of transition is the possible lack of legitimacy of the democratic system as a consequence of increasing social discontent. We can also add other indicators that refer to the legitimacy of different components of the democratic system, such as political parties, the importance given to the parliament or the consideration of voting as a civic obligation. In every one of these cases, favourable opinions do not prevent from fierce criticism when it comes to how these institutions work. Precisely the distance between these two levels is one of the characteristics of Spanish political culture and can be partially explained through the cultural roots that support democracy in Spain.

However, the main concern is the indifference of certain groups of young people, specially the under-ages; they are indifferent about democracy, and about other aspects of political life. Therefore, 3 out of 10 minors are indifferent to or don't give an answer when asked about their preferred form of government. It is true that this is an evident effect of the life cycle, which makes people between 15 and 17 years old the most uninterested in terms of what happens in the public sphere (this percentage decreases to 18% among people between 21 and 24 and to 10% among people between 25 and 29). On first look, it seems that the age of 18 still works as a rite that activates mechanisms that make politization possible. However, we should think more about this topic because of its repercussions for issues such as civic learning or strategies of socialization. As youth is now a longer period of time, the access to adulthood is delayed and, as a consequence, minors progressively

feel pressured towards a position that is closer to the subordination of childhood than to the transition that defines youth.

The second characteristic to highlight refers to the importance of political disaffection among the Spanish youth. When I say disaffection I mean the prevalence of an attitude of cognitive and affective distancing with regard to everything that is explicitly described as political or that has this meaning for the young people. This attitude is expressed through multiple symptoms, like lack of interest, inefficiency or impotence. Therefore, young Spanish people show high levels of political disaffection, way above the European average.
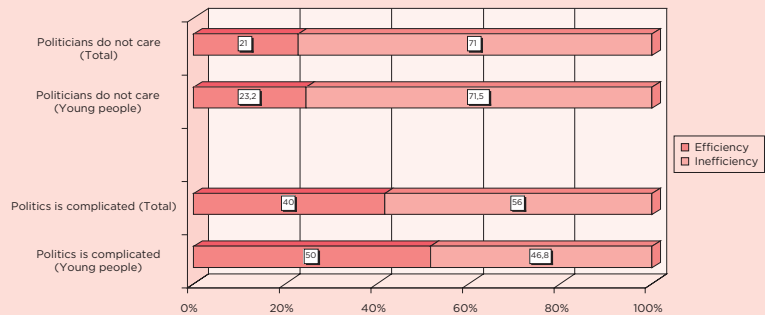
For example, if we focus on the most usual indicator, political interest, the new generations of Spanish people distinguish themselves for their low level of interest in politics or political issues (Chart 1). Only 22% of the interviewees say they are very interested or interested in this kind of topics, while the European average of the countries participating in EUYOUPART is 37%, and even in a country like Great Britain, where indicators regarding youth politization are surprisingly low, the percentage of people who are interested in politics is 30%.

Chart 1. **Interest in politics among young spanish people and young europeans**
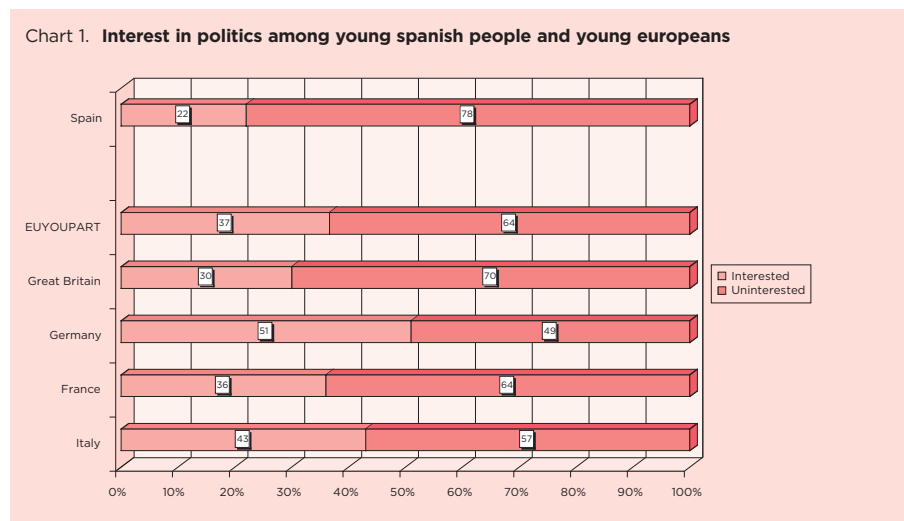
As was to be expected, these low rates of political interest seem to be related to the life cycle; however, the improvement among groups of older people is not spectacular, as the interest among young people between 21 and 24 is still only 28%. Therefore, the explanation goes beyond the life cycle as according to the data of a recent survey by the CIS 32% of the young people over 18 say they are very interested or interested in politics. It is evident that politics –at least as defined socially– does not personally interest many young people, as shown by the fact that only a small minority tries to politically persuade or convince their most immediate acquaintances. The comparisons with Italy and France are very significant. If more than a half of young Italians and 36% of the French try to politically convince their friends or family, less than a third of the Spanish people say they try frequently or sometime, 47% never does it. The secondary position of political issues in the life of a majority of young Spanish people seems pretty evident.

This lack of interest seems to be linked to the low receptivity of political institutions and politicians felt by young people. The institutions, as well as their representatives are not able, as many young people say, to cope with the needs and demands of citizens in general, and particularly not with young people's specific situation: approximately 30% of them say that "no political party protects the interests of young people". Again differences with the rest of the population are not significant. Chart 2 shows that a similar percentage of young people and adults say "politicians don't worry about what the people think", which proves that external political inefficiency is related to a diversity of factors, such as having lived in a dictatorship, or how politics and political processes work after a transition, and the democratic practices developed during the years. On the other side, when we study internal political efficiency, which is linked to the political competence and capacity individuals attribute to themselves, there are differences, but this time favourable to the new generations (Chart 2). This is one of the only attitudinal indicators where young people show higher levels of politization than adults. This result also confirms evidences that were coming up again and again during the last years: while democratic culture settles down and develops, citizens value their capacity as political actors more and more, especially among new generations.

Chart 2. **Political efficiency of young people and adults**

	Efficiency	Inefficiency
Politicians do not care (Total)	21	71
Politicians do not care (Young people)	23,2	71,5
Politics is complicated (Total)	40	56
Politics is complicated (Young people)	50	46,8

Source: Young people between 15 and 29 years of age: INJUVE; Total population: CIS 2004

The third characteristic I want to mention is related to participation and transformations of the repertoire of political activities of young people. Traditionally, one of the most distinctive characteristics of the Spanish case in comparison to other European countries was the low level of political commitment of Spanish people, which translated into a very low level of participation in political activities (Benedicto, 2004b). The limited view of participation in Spanish political culture and little space for participation of citizens in the institutional structure has until now explained limited political activism of the Spanish society (Morán, 1997). However, during the last years there has been a spectacular growth of what was traditionally called non-conventional participation and, above all, of those activities that incorporate an element of protest, up to a point where, according to the European Social Survey (2002-2003) Spanish people are –after Luxembourgian people– the Europeans that go to more demonstrations (Ferrer, 2005).

This transformation is especially significant among the new generations. If we compare the data obtained through the Youth Study Spain 2004 with

the results provided by the European Social Survey, young people between 15 and 29 carry out more political protest activities than the population as a whole and adults only exceed them when it comes to conventional activities such as contacting a politician. But when we can really see the size of political activism is when we compare it to other cases; for example, to France or Italy, two countries that show higher levels in practically every indicator related to politization. The information in Chart 3 speaks for itself: more than half of the Spanish young people say they have participated in demonstrations and around 40% have signed a petition, while less than 10% has contacted with a politician. Young Italians, on their side, show a greater balance in terms of their repertoire of political activities. Protest activities and more conventional activities like participating in political meetings are on the same level. When it comes to France, and contrary to what we might think, French people show lower levels of political activism.

This new type of activism in the Spanish political life, however, means a lot of new questions that researchers will have to answer. In this sense, it is fundamental to analyze the motivations of young people as to why they prefer this type of participation and not other kind of activities that enjoy higher levels of social acceptance. It will be necessary to assess to what extent protest activities, as they have spread lately, constitute an expressive instrument used by young people to show their commitment towards the community they live in, and at the same time to develop their role as citizens. We cannot forget that, as often stated by Salvador Giner, "frequent citizen protests against governmental decisions are a great mobilizing factor, but are not formed by active citizens in a strict sense (2005, p.19).

Chart 3. **Political activism of young people in spain and europe**
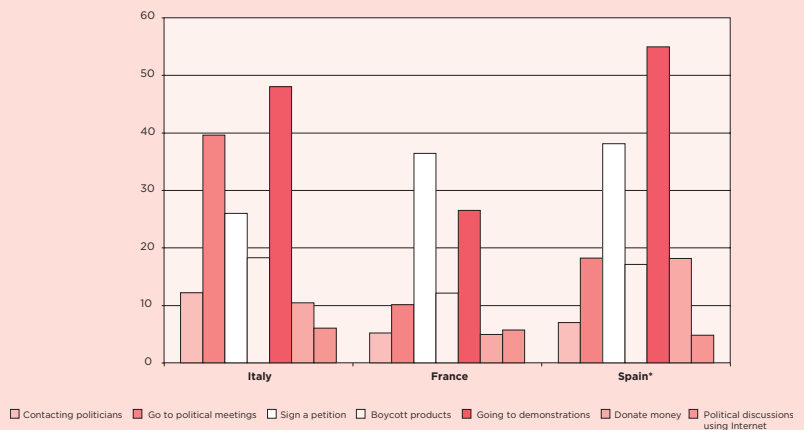
Source: Spain (INJUVE 2005); other countries (EUYOUPART 2005). Young people between 15-24 years of age

The fourth characteristic I want to highlight refers to the prevalence of a conception of citizenship that tries to stay far away from politization, where meanings that are explicitly political are substituted by a more diffused conception of solidarity and the observance of norms is the basis for civic life. A qualitative research with young people between 16 and 18

years old carried out at the beginning of this decade already clearly pointed at this direction (Morán & Benedicto, 2003); qualitative data of this survey serves to prove this trend. When asked to assess the importance of different behaviours "in order to be a good citizen", young people between 15 and 29 years old valued those behaviours very highly that referred to solidarity with people in the own country and the rest of the world, followed by those behaviours that were related to obeying established rules (no tax evasion or breaking the law). Between one type of behaviour and the other there is also "trying to understand other people", an attitude that, as confirmed by later analyses, is influenced by solidarity, as well as by a political dimension that is the basis for democratic coexistence. On a second level we can find obligations with more explicit political content and, among them, vote is considered more important than participation in associations (Chart 4) (4).

If we continue with the analysis and compare statistical information of young people with the whole Spanish population, there appear important differences, as adults in general give more importance to fulfil the norms than to solidarity and, at the same time, political obligations are also more important for them, above all voting. Although there is not enough information to know if there is a true generational change, we can say that today's young people and adults seem to have different premises when they think about the nature of civic life: adults and social order, young people and solidarity. Among the new generations political obligations as a privileged field of expression of the condition of citizen have lost its strength, bonds of solidarity with other members of the community are what matters to them. Although being a bit too simplistic, we could say that, in the past, being a citizen meant respecting the order and participating politically, now, for the young people, above all, it means showing solidarity towards others.

(4)
According to the results of a factorial analysis carried out it is possible to distinguish three dimensions, depending on the assessment by young people of the different behaviours: the dimension of solidarity, with items that specifically refer to this topic, and environmental consumption; the dimension of social order, where items included refer to the respect for norms and the military obligation if needed; and lastly, the political dimension, where items that refer to voting, participation in associations and staying informed are included. The item that refers to understanding the position of others is part of the dimension of solidarity, as well as the political dimension.

Chart 4. **Assessment of norms of citizenship**

* Colours reflect the three underlying dimensions mentioned in note 3
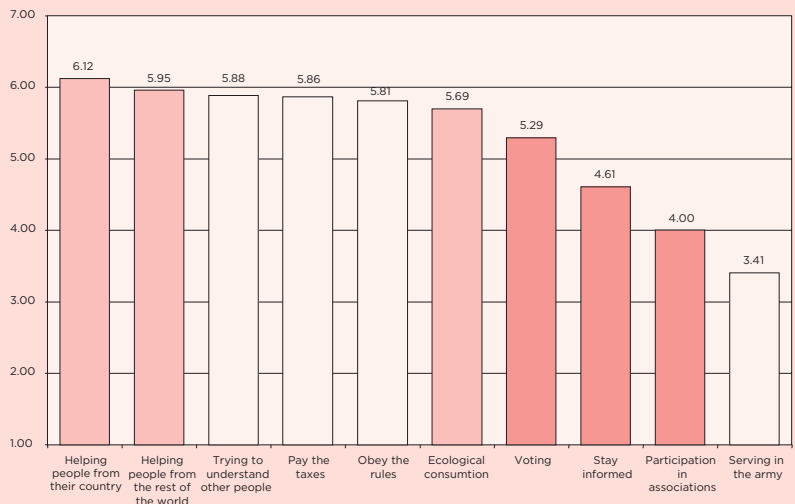
Source: INJUVE 2005. Young people between 15-29 years of age

Complex political universes of young people

The most immediate question is: do these results prove our initial argumentations about how inadequate negative diagnoses are, therefore highlighting the complexity of young people's political life? The answer seems to be positive, if we consider the fact that each of the chosen characteristics points towards a different direction, which, at least, confirms the need of abandoning the traditional view of youth as mainly uninterested people about what happens around them, as if all what goes beyond their limited range of immediate individual interests would be considered none of their concern. As proven by the Spanish data, and by surveys carried out in other European countries, young people worry about many collective issues that constitute the basis of public discussions (O'Toole, Marsch & Jones, 2003; Muxel, 2001). However, this position is also compatible with the fact that there is a high level of rejection sometimes, and sometimes scepticism regarding conventional discourses and political instruments, that is, institutionalized politics, that focus around the media and opinion polls (Megías, 2005). Depending on where we put the emphasis, we will develop a certain view of young people's political life: we can insist on the evidences of apathy and lack of interest for political activities, this way proving the thesis of growing depolitization of young people and pessimistic predictions about the lack of collective commitment; but it is also possible to highlight the similarities of sceptical positions between young people and adults, in this case offering a more normalized view of today's youth; or, on the contrary, we can underline the signs that tell us that young people experience politics in a different way than adults, focusing on new topics and using new instruments to express their interests and concerns (Benedicto & Luque, 2006).

Each discursive position we refer to is linked to the debate between those who think that young people, with their life styles and attitudes regarding the world that surrounds them, are becoming an unconcerned generation, disconnected of the collective, and those who, on the contrary, think that young people now have a different type of politization, an alternative to the politization of previous generations. This debate is at risk of becoming one of those sterile conflicts so common in the context of the social sciences. There are many aspects being discussed: methodological questions about how to collect the data, opposing approaches on how our democratic system works, or different assessments of young people's attitudes and behaviours. However, it is very difficult to completely take one side on this debate, as each one of them reflects a part of the complex reality of youth. In all dimensions we are able to analyze it is possible to find evidences in one sense or the other, which also reflects those previously mentioned trends towards integration or autonomy and which are linked to the political life of young people.

This analytical strategy of comparing different views or creating typologies of young people depending on the predominant form of how they face political issues doesn't lead us anywhere, because in the first case we forget the complexity of empirical evidences (as we proved for the case of Spain), which prevents a clear diagnosis in one sense or the other, and in the second case differences are so extreme between one type of young people and the other types that we forget homogenizing cultural trends that affect youth in contemporary societies.

From my point of view, it is more useful to think about these positions as political cultures of the new generations within European democracies (apathy and political cynicism, democratic scepticism and the redefinition of politics). Some political cultures, in spite of reminding us of significant structures that sometimes are in opposition to each other coexist in the contexts of experience and activity of the citizens. And it is the citizens themselves, in this case the young people, who combine its meanings and use them to understand events and act in the public sphere. While in modern societies, the access of young people to society followed well-established institutional patterns and identities reproduced the cleavages of the adult political society, in this second modernity, where transitions have lost previous certainties, the situation is very different. An unstable and hybrid character where references of different political worlds are mixed up, even among those with defined identities, characterizes political identities of young people. This way, it is usual among young activists to find a discourse of negation of the political character of their activity, among young militants of political parties it is normal to see intense criticism regarding institutional activity of adults, or demands of civic competence by young people among those uninterested or apathetic with regard to collective issues.

To understand the idea of political universes with different meanings, symbols, discourses of different political cultures, we have to leave the mentalist conception of private beliefs and internalized values that explain opinions and behaviours of individuals behind. On the contrary, we have to take into account, as stated by Lichterman and Cefaï (2006: 393), that "culture structures the form in which actors create their strategies, how they feel their action field and define their identities and solidarities". Instead of exclusively referring to values, attitudes and opinions we have to refer to shared representations of the political society, natural codes that organize public discourses, political vocabulary, narrations, as well as everyday practices of the actors in the collective world.

But the actions of political cultures do not happen in a social vacuum, but in concrete places and moments, in political and social scenarios that shape them and make them unique. That is why when we speak about political cultures of young people we cannot stop thinking about the influence of young people's life-conditions, their search for integration and autonomy, about how they define, oppose or redefine what they conceive as political.

To sum it up, young people develop experiences, shape their opinions and carry out different types of actions around these different groups of political meanings depending on their life circumstances. We cannot forget that young people usually live in several worlds at a time, with different logics, and they combine these logics in a singular way to form their own political universe, in order to explain, argue and justify their relation with politics. Instead of keep discussing about whether youth today is disconnected, sceptical or, on the contrary, is an alternative, we should start thinking that most of the young people are all three things at a time.

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