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Editorial: Youth Civic and Political Participation and Citizenship Education in the Mediterranean: Lessons from the Arab Spring

In December 2010, a young economically under-privileged Tunisian man, Mohamed Bouazizi, set himself on fire protesting the police confiscation of the fruits and vegetables he was selling in the Tunisian coastal town of Sidi Bouzid. This event generated a series of protests and demonstrations that spread across Tunisia until the dictator, Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, was forced to leave the country on January 16th. Soon enough, the so-called "Arab Spring" spread to other Arab countries leading to the overthrowing of dictator rulers in Egypt, Libya, and Yemen. Further mass demonstrations and demands for political changes took place in Lebanon, Palestine, Iran, Morocco, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. Syria has been the focus of daily demonstrations, repression and controversies over external involvement for several months.

Beyond the growing debate between the claim for the authenticity of the current Arab revolts and Western involvement, whether indirectly (Syria) or through direct military action (Libya), two striking facts remain unique to the current "Arab Spring": first, the overwhelming mass involvement of the popular classes and their persistence to overthrow their ruling dictatorships. Second, there is a clear leading role played by youth in organizing and

sustaining the struggle. It is the second striking phenomenon of youth revolutionary involvement that constitutes the main themes of the current issue of JSSE – and the way this movement expanded throughout Europe, namely in the North of the Mediterranean.

There has been intense discussion on the promise (or the disillusionment) surrounding these events as either a sign (or a failure) of the democratic transition in the South of the Mediterranean. But, given the fact that young people are more than one-third of the population in the Arab world, the role of education and schools, on the one hand, and youth grassroots organizations, on the other, is central – and surely persists beyond the mediatisation of the "Arab Spring." What are young people actual daily experiences in schools and beyond? What are the meanings of these rising forms of political protest for young people? What visions of democracy and citizenship are being constructed? This volume presents a series of papers that discuss how the Arab Spring has engaged young people in Egypt and Libya, and considers the events that co-occurred/followed in two countries of the Eurozone particularly affected by the economic crisis and austerity measures: Portugal and Greece. In fact, it is recognized that youth on both sides of the Mediterranean and beyond share, as journalist Bruce Crumpley stated back in 2011, a similar "conviction that existing social structures – and the leaders responsible for them – are simply unable to deliver on their people's aspirations (...) and the result is a growing risk that the explosion of anger on Greece's streets this week will be repeated and with greater intensity, both there and elsewhere" (<http://world.time.com/2011/06/17/why-greek-tumult-signals-the-coming-of-europes-own-arab-spring/>).

This apparent participatory revolution (Kaase 1984) is quite interesting particularly because it openly challenges a vision of young people as detached from politics that appeared to be central to political, academic and educational discourses in the last decades and seems to echo Hannah Arendt's vision, back in 1969, when she was considering "student rebellion as a global phenomenon" and affirming: "psychologically this generation seems everywhere characterized by sheer courage, an astounding will to action, and a no less astounding confidence in the possibility of change" (p. 15). Again, a generation of young people across the Mediterranean and the world is faced with a highly disputable and uncertain future – or even with no future at all. And, astoundingly again, they act and trust it will make a difference.

The papers in this issue report and discuss how these events were lived and thought of by young people on both sides of the Mediterranean – involving visions of action and trust, and the lack of



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both of them, in Egypt, Lybia, Portugal and Greece. Interestingly, papers come from various disciplinary traditions in the social sciences, and thus expose the richness of conjugating these traditions in reading civic and political participation. Nevertheless, two striking theoretical trends appear to cross the various papers. The first is that context matters. The need for contextualized research and analysis clearly emerges from these papers, whose authors discuss global movements and tendencies, such as the clear emergence of the internet as a context for political action, while emphasizing that meaning is context-created and context-specific – and therefore action should not be viewed without taking into account the cultural, social and relational context where it evolves. The second is that emotions matter. The idea that political action does not exist without passion, as Michael Walzer would say (2002), clearly transpires in this collection of studies – and the possibility that political action expresses different emotions is also of significance, as consensus and dissent are the essential two-faces of democracy (Ranci re 2005).

The paper by Youniss, Barber and Billen, that rests on interviews with young Egyptian activists and non-activists, begins exactly by questioning how researchers approach the issue of civic and political engagement and participation to defend that “behaviors and attitudes [should] not be viewed abstractly, but instead as grounded in and coupled with the proper enabling or impeding conditions”. In fact, this emphasis on what Kelly (1966) designated the ecological metaphor is essential for a deep vision of individual and collective action as depending on both attitudes and knowledge, as well as on resources and opportunities – civic and political action as deriving from agency and structure. The interviews reveal an expansion of the public discourse: “Mohsen ... recounted that an old man congratulated him and his generation by saying that because of what they did “we can have a conversation about the vote [instead of being restricted] to talk about football.”” – a quote, by the way, that could well be equally pronounced in any European country; and an expansion of the agora beyond Tahrir Square, as activists recognize that now they can discuss politics everywhere: in cafes, in taxis, ... This obvious renaissance of politics and political action seems to have also generated a massive trust in the ability of “we, the people” to change and produce change – even if the more recent events in Egypt and elsewhere show that political leaders should clearly cherish trust as the core of democratic living and legitimacy.

Abdullatif’s paper about Arab women’s participation in the current political transformation brings to mind two interrelated historical junctures in the history of Arab women’s participation in the struggle for liberation. First, the participation of Algerian women in the revolution against French colonialism was conceived as an indispensable step towards women’s emancipation and equality in the new society after liberation (Jayawardena 1986). Regrettably, when the revolution was over, freedom

fighter Algerian women were confined back to their traditional domestic roles in a male dominated patriarchal society. Second, Palestinian women grass root involvement in the first Intifada in 1987, marked an articulated Arab women’s feminist agenda in which they argued for the integration of both nationalist and feminist discourses (Abdo 1991, Hasso 1998). Palestinian women Intifada activists vowed that they will not accept to repeat the fate of their Algerian sisters and that they have already learned the lesson from that experience (Abdo 1991; Peteet 1991). Unfortunately again, when the “Oslo” agreement -- with all of its implications of set-back for the Intifada and national cause – resulted in yet another male dominated semi-political system, Palestinian women’s seminal achievements during the Intifada were compromised once again (Makkawi & Jaramillo 2005).

In both Algerian and Palestinian women’s experiences, women’s participation in the public space – which after all is a male dominated space in a patriarchal Arab society – was accomplished through their active involvement in the national liberation struggle. Arab women’s political involvement in Abdullatif’s study (Libya and Egypt) were able to venture into the public space within the intensified actions of the Arab Spring thorough the internet as a “virtual public space” which was creatively utilized by activists in these countries. The question remains, however, for current day Arab women political activists through the unfolding developments of the Arab Spring to “learn the lesson” and avoid the unfortunate fate of their Algerian and Palestinian sisters in previous cases of the national struggle?

Regardless of their sharply different ideological underpinnings, there is a striking parallel resemblance between the vast majorities of the post-independence Arab regimes (with all that is imbedded in their continuing dependency on their previous colonizers) on one hand, and the communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe until the early nineties of the twentieth century. Both groups of regimes would be safely and fairly described as repressive and provide little space form freedom expression and political participation of their populations. Following the fall of the Berlin wall, a wide spread of mass protests mushroomed through the various Central and Eastern European communist regimes culminating in drastic regime changes in most of these countries with less than a year. Optimistic observers of the early days of the Arab Spring, predicted similar fate for the majority of the repressive Arab regimes. However, the mass protests and popular demonstrations that brought about the overthrow of both dictators of Tunisia and Egypt with relatively very few losses in human life, was contrasted with bloody civil wars in Libya, Yemen and Syria. With the growing controversy about Western direct or indirect involvement in the last three countries, one is pondering that the Arab Spring has not been “spring” after all. In contrast with the swift collapse of Central and Eastern Europe regimes, we cannot fully understand the quick demise of the Arab Spring as it could be by and large

defined by mass protests and demonstration as opposed to prolonged civil wars with rising numbers of human casualties.

Despite this shift in the means of protest, many countries around the world have been inspired by the early days of the Arab Spring. The paper by Estanque, Costa and Soeiro about the current wave of global mass protests inspired by the Arab Spring, with particular focus on the Portuguese case, recalls the widespread of the students' movement of the 1960s (Altbach 1989). In both cases, youth have been in the forefront of organizing and sustaining the struggle for democracy and political participation. But this youth leadership and youth inspiration alone, is not sufficient without our understanding of the material condition of relative deprivation (Gurr 1970) and economic exploitation. Certainly, as the paper reveals, the combination of repressive and exploitative local material conditions, together with youth energy and shared aspirations for a better future, facilitated by contemporary modes of communication (the internet), is a fertile mixture of conditions conducive for mass protest and demonstration that spread from country to another. In this case, the Arab Spring was only an inspiration.

The paper by Chryssochoou, Papastamou and Prodromitis considers the situation in Greece during the severe economic crisis the country is facing since 2010, and particularly in the midst of the very intense political mobilization in the final months of 2011 when the effect of austerity measures was growingly painful and the political mobilization of the Greeks was peaking. As the paper describes, the events in Greece are within the most dramatic of the Eurozone crisis. Both the Arab youth generation and the young Greeks, together with their young European co-citizens, are more educated and potentially more unemployed than older cohorts. But while young Arabs trust that fighting for democracy and pluralism will guarantee a future, young Greeks, as young Europeans in other Eurozone countries, are confronted with the limits of a future when democracy does not resonate with trust, participation and equality. The crisis in Greece and other Eurozone countries is not mainly the crisis of the sovereign debt but the crisis democracy and of the legitimacy of the balance between representative government and market economy inside the European Union.

In this paper, drawing on classical work in social psychological theory, Chryssochoou, Papastamou and Prodromitis explore the structure of reactions towards the crisis, from various forms of collective action to individualized solutions, and including depression. The design of the study considers the role of different predictors of these reactions such as people's actual financial position, sense of grievances, feelings of vulnerability and emotions towards the events. Results indicate that "financial threat should be taken into serious consideration when researching political participation in times of crisis. Moreover, sense of grievances is linked to more radical forms of action but also to depression. ... it is important to note that it is deprivation in relation to

others and not a sudden loss of income that lead people to react when facing a crisis."

The Open Space Technology used by Claudia Gross and Andreas Jacobs rests on the recognition that "the Arab-Islamic culture is very much based on the spoken word. ... Therefore, the Egyptian revolution itself was based on the desire to speak up." The project reported here takes into account that "[t]he desire to express themselves on topics like politics, religious diversity, social norms, gender and environment remains and seems to be increasing. It is channelled in arts, graffiti, jokes, songs, Facebook-pages, blogs and many other formats. No surprise, that since the revolution any format that provides opportunities to talk and exchange fell on fruitful ground." The idea that democracy rests on deliberation and debate among inevitably diverse opinions is at the core of classic political theories, such as the vision of Jurgen Habermas or Hannah Arendt. Open Space creates the conditions for this deliberative climate to emerge, clearly in tune with the cultural traditions of the South (and North) of the Mediterranean and the momentum resulting from the events in Tahrir Square.

Back in the late eighties, Ignacio Martin-Baró (1996) challenged social scientists to assume the responsibility of taking sides on behalf of the people, by recognizing the role that oppression and social injustice play on the well-being and freedom of both individuals and communities. This commitment is, we think, clearly assumed by the authors of the papers included in this issue – and fortunately so, as the result is a diverse and thought-provoking assembly of research and praxis that urges us to look for deeper, more complex and simultaneously committed research on the civic and political engagement and participation of young citizens across the world.

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