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BOOK AND MEDIA REVIEWS

Imagining Europe: narratives of identity and belonging

Ross, A. (2019). *Finding Political Identities: Young People in a Changing Europe*. London: Palgrave MacMillan. 366 pp., €83.19 (hardcover) ISBN 978-3-319-90874-8; €67.82 (ebook) ISBN 978-3-319-90875-5.

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Given the current climate of uncertainty over Brexit and the rise of populism more generally across Europe, this well-timed and insightful publication by Alistair Ross could not be more apposite in its focus. Based on fieldwork conducted between 2011 and 2016, the study draws on key theories and research relating to identity, human rights and citizenship to interrogate how young Europeans are constructing their political identities. Using a process of deliberative discussion, the author conducted 324 group discussions in 29 countries, engaging with 2,000 young people between the ages of 11 and 18 years over the course of the study. While the author provides a persuasive argument for not including Greece, Ireland and the United Kingdom in the study, their absence seems like a missed opportunity to garner young people's views at a key moment on the cusp of historical change. Nonetheless, the breadth of the study allows Ross to capture the impact of many of the political, social and demographic changes that have occurred across Europe in recent decades, including boundary changes and the rapid expansion of the EU.

In addition to explanatory notes and appendices, the study is presented in seven chapters. Chapter 1 provides a comprehensive account of its organisation and methodological approach and lays out the theoretical base of the research, examining key concepts such as identity, nation, citizenship and the idea of Europe. Building on existing conceptualisations of identity as socially constructed and fluid, Ross emphasises the contingent and situated nature of the young people's narratives and skillfully uses an initial foray into the data to illustrate the complexity of the interactions and the resulting layers of identifications and affiliations. In terms of his findings, Ross lays out his key themes in the following six chapters, with chapters 2 and 3 addressing the cultural, communal and civic values which young people draw on to construct their narratives of identity in the context of a diverse, multicultural Europe. Chapter 4 examines the resources which young people harness in those constructions, including local knowledge, engagement with a range of media, and social interactions with family and, to a lesser extent, friendship groups and schools. In Chapter 5, Ross brings a range of locational lenses to bear on the data, revealing commonalities and fissures in young people's thinking across these spaces. Chapter 6 examines the idea of nested identities and levels of attachment across contexts, from the local to the global. Positing the idea of the kaleidoscope as an explanatory metaphor, the final chapter explores the processes used by participants to construct

their multiple identities, drawing on shifting patterns of contextual resources, and flexible levels of identification to imagine affiliations beyond the nation or state.

Probably because of the openness of its methodology and the size of its database, this is, in many ways, an unwieldy study, with crosscutting themes and intersecting lenses creating a certain messiness; indeed, the author describes the study as ‘intentionally noisy’ (p. 37, original emphasis). While it would be easy to get lost in the richness and complexity of the detail, there are a number of key findings that deserve particular attention. This study challenges the commonly held view that young people are not interested in politics and constructs its participants as politically aware, critically reflective and engaged in political action. At the heart of the study is the idea of Europe as embodying, in the words of one young participant, a ‘conscience in common’ where shared values define the relationship between and within states (p. 70). Sensitive to the dangers of right-wing nationalism, the young people turn towards an imagined European community premised on the shared values of peace, solidarity, rights, equality and personal freedoms. Many identify the EU’s initial response to refugees in 2015 as a source of pride and evidence of European humanity and solidarity, while concerns about minority rights, anti-racism and gender equality are commonly expressed. Overall, while there are regional differences and nuances, the dominant response to diversity is one of openness to other cultures, recognition of the rights of minorities and of the importance of addressing racism and discrimination; perspectives which, in the views of the young participants, draw a clear line between their generation and that of their parents and grandparents.

Not everyone agrees, however. A minority express views consistent with more right wing ideologies and concepts of citizenship and of rights that are exclusionary in their application. Views are also tempered by regional and national socio-historical contexts, as well as by the more general persistence of older stereotypes and prejudices. Roma, in particular, are subjected to the ‘ultimate othering’ as outsiders with little control over how they are represented (p. 113). Given the pervasive nature and historical longevity of anti-Roma and Traveller prejudice across Europe this is, unfortunately, not surprising, and the small number of participants who express an understanding of Roma as rights holders underlines the need for a renewed emphasis on anti-bias and anti-racist education within the human rights framework (Hutchinson, Chihade and Puiu, 2018; Kende, Hadarics and Láštiová, 2017). We should be concerned about the apparent irrelevance of citizenship education across Europe to young people’s political education and the perceived reluctance of teachers to provide spaces for political discussion. Consistent with findings elsewhere, this failure to provide young people with authentic educational spaces where issues of values, politics and identity can be interrogated and discussed needs urgent action (Ho, McAvoy, Hess and Gibbs, 2017; Zembylas, 2016).

In conclusion, this study deserves to be read by all interested in education, politics and the future of European democracy and highlights the importance of paying attention to the views of young people. Given young people’s emerging leadership in global climate action, the findings give room for cautious optimism that this generation of young Europeans will transcend difference and self-interest to act in solidarity for a shared future. As one participant in the study says, “If we don’t support each other, how can we change the world?” (p. 91).

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