Exploring New Citizenship Practices: The Meaning of Young Activists' Political Engagement in the Basque Country

Ane Larrinaga, Onintza Odriozola, Mila Amurrio, and Iker Iraola

Abstract The article analyses the meaning of innovative activist practices carried out by politicised young people in the Basque Country while considering the lines of continuity and rupture of said practices with respect to the political tradition in which these young people were socialised. To this end, we have referred to the results of qualitative research carried out with the aid of in-depth interviews during 2018. The analysis demonstrates that young activists are gradually moving away from intermediation by institutionalised political actors who have, so far, led political opposition in the Basque Country and proposes new, less formal, ways of relating to politics. More specifically, they are shifting political participation to areas of daily life, thus broadening the meaning of politics and redesigning the limits of the political arena. Their practices are understood as acts carried out by activist citizens who transform diverse social spaces into citizenship building sites. The transformation of young participants into activist citizens is underpinned by the existence of a particular structure for political opportunity in the Basque political field: a long-standing culture of community politics, characterised by counter-hegemonic activism and linked to nation building projects, in which they are socialised at an early age. Nonetheless, the new generations of activists tailor the acquired dispositions in this politicised context to the current conditions of individualisation and distancing from institutions, typical of the second modernity.

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1 Introduction

Studies on the political participation of young people in recent years coincide in identifying a series of trends common to Western youth. On the one hand, there have been changes in the young people's forms of political participation, having become more diverse, fragmented and sporadic, as youth transitions are prolonged and lose linearity. On the other hand, the processes of individualisation and deinstitutionalisation taking over the political field bring with them greater disconnection with political institutional actors and, generally speaking, a distancing from the political system on the part of new generations. The Basque Country, a European region located between Spain and France, with a strong cultural and political identity, is no exception to these general trends. The report "Portraits of Youth" drawn up in the Autonomous Community of the Basque Country by the Basque government on a yearly basis provides meaningful data on the attitudes to politics of the youth in this region in 2020: only 29% of young people between the ages of 18 and 29 are very interested or quite interested in politics, 71% do not consider themselves close to any political party, and, of all institutions, political parties are the ones that inspire less trust (Observatorio Vasco de la Juventud, 2020).

On the other hand, Basque politics also features a series of particularities with respect to European democratic societies. Certainly, the Basque socio-political field has undergone some of the general changes occurring in Spain and Europe in recent years but also other specific transformations deriving from the disappearance of the armed organisation ETA, the end of political violence and the gradual normalisation of the democratic system. This implied a restructuring of the overall political field in the Basque Country and of society itself in this new situation. In particular, it implied a reorganisation of the Basque nationalist left-wing forces close to ETA. Since Franco's dictatorship, these organisations had been generating culture and participatory practices which are deeply rooted in large sectors of society and are characterised by a form of activism which is counter-hegemonic and has a tendency to undermine the established order.

These left-wing forces are currently reformulating their discourses and political practices and are becoming more and more institutionalised and integrated in political infrastructure. At the same time, Basque society is still a relatively politicised society as a result of the ongoing national conflict. It has intense community life linked to nation building and state building projects, and a long tradition in self-organisation, a legacy of Franco's dictatorship and upheld over the last few decades. Modernity and tradition merge in Basque reality, a socially and economically

developed society, yet maintaining a legacy of community life and collective cooperation, reinforced by the abovementioned political projects (Zelik, 2017). Historically, this capacity for self-organization and vindication has led to important social innovations at the grassroots level. In the cultural sphere, we can mention the foundation of *ikastolas* or schools in the Basque language and the creation of the standard Basque. In the socioeconomic field, the establishment of a network of cooperative companies has been relevant (Heales, Hodgson & Rich, 2017). Regarding other social issues, it is also a society open to change and innovation; for example, it is at the forefront of European public policies on gender equality, thanks to the power of its feminist movements (Esteban Galarza, Hernández García & Imaz Martínez, 2017).

From Franco's dictatorship right up to the last decade, the institutionalisation of the Basque political field went hand in hand with a far-reaching mobilisation cycle which, although inspired by the leitmotif of national construction, has allowed multiple demands from a variety of sectors to merge, creating a true protest cycle with complex and comprehensive content (Zubiaga, 2014). New nationalisms, like the Basque one, are developing a discourse to include alternative neo-identity values, such as environmentalism, feminism, antimilitarism and resistance to state violence (Letamendia, 1997). In this respect, the specific nature of the mobilisation cycle and Basque national sovereignty claims in recent decades lies in the articulation of universalist left-wing values and the demands of new social movements. The result is an exceptionally active civil society, with a great diversity of popular initiatives and social groups (Zubiaga, 2014).

Against the backdrop of a society that has been highly politicised and mobilised, and one that is advancing towards a different political scenario, we cannot help but wonder about the chances of this activist culture being upheld by new generations or about the shape it may take. Apart from a commitment to the election process, opinion polls reveal that only a minority of Basque youth is actively involved in political and civic matters. Standing out in this minority is a socially significant core group that has been socialised in the activist tradition of self-organisation. It is on this group of young activists that we intend to focus in this article. The aim of the text presented below is twofold: in the first place, to identify and understand the meaning of the innovative activist practices of the politicised youth in the social and political conditions of the second modernity at local level in the Basque Country and, in the second place, to detect the lines of continuity and rupture of said practices in relation to the political tradition in which they were socialised.

2 Young People's Political Participation and the Limits of the Political Field

Young people's political participation is currently a multifaceted reality (Gozzo & Sampugnaro, 2016; Rainsford, 2017), whose understanding transcends the strict limits of participatory analysis itself. Participation inevitably leads us to a

theoretical and methodological consideration of the configuration of the political *field* (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Bourdieu, 1994) in liberal democratic systems. Despite successive additions to the institutions in modern democracies in order to cater to new issues and social bases (Forbrig, 2005), the political participation of young people in Europe and other parts of the world is increasingly defined by a rise in the diversity of repertoires, which include practices not contemplated by the institutionalised forms of participation, as well as hybrid or mixed programmes (Hustinx et al., 2012; Sloam, 2016; Monticelli & Bassoli, 2016). In order to understand the current political practices of young people, we need to reflect on the nature and limits of the political field in current liberal democracies and on the forms of participation considered legitimate therein. We can appreciate that it is often the case that young people participate in ways not related to political party membership and elections (Quintelier, 2007), and, moreover, some participatory practices are not recognised as political by society (Bhavnani, 2014; Quintelier, 2007) nor, on some occasions, by the young people involved themselves (Svenningsson, 2016). Indeed, despite their engagement and interest in the collective, some young, committed people have difficulty in attributing political meaning to their activity (MacKinnon et al., 2007; Stolle et al., 2008; Rainsford, 2017) due to the categories of common sense through which they perceive the social world and the existence of an asymmetrical access to the meaning.

Indeed, there is dispute in the current political field about what should be understood as political participation as well as about the scope of the practices that may legitimately be considered as such. Sociological and political analysis is not immune to the controversies raised as a result of the adjustment of the concept to the new realities. The steady expansion of the available forms of participation in recent decades highlights the relevance of political participation for democracy and democratisation (van Deth, 2014). However, the discussion on the increased opportunities for political participation is accompanied by a growing ambivalence as regards concept. As Hooghe points out (2014), at a time when political decision-making has become fuzzy and may be seen as the result of a complex interaction between players located at different geographical levels and scales, and when political activism migrates to other spaces, experts in political behaviour should likewise shift their focus of attention in the same direction.

There has been a major conceptual leap in the evolution from a minimalist conception of political participation, channelled institutionally and aimed directly at the government, the state or the political élites, to the more individualised forms that are currently being developed in the social sphere. A broadening of the concept is already visible in Norris' (2002) proposals, when she states that activities that seek a social or civil impact or aim at changing the systematic patterns of social behaviour can be considered types of political participation. Adding this type of activity to "conventional" participatory practices already implies a considerable expansion of the concept of political participation.

In this context, there have been efforts to draw up a new, updated, conceptual map, to encompass different conceptualisations. One of the most well known is the van Deth (2014) revision, which proposes four types of political participation,

namely, a first type of institutional, conventional or formal participation; a second type of non-conventional, non-institutional or contentious political participation; a third, which covers the different types of civic, social or community commitment; and a last type of individualised and expressive political participation. This classification has been the subject of much discussion (Hooghe, 2014; Hosch-Dayican, 2014; de Moor, 2016). Yet, it is indicative of the current need to redefine and explain the expansion of the concept in the face of the wealth of emerging, changing practices, the progressive interaction between differing logics, the multiplicity of objectives of certain modes of participation and their mobility in different private, public, political and economic fields.

The way we define the political field and conceptualise political participation affects the interpretation of the changes that occur in democratic systems. In recent years, surveys carried out at various levels have shown that many young people stated that they were disenchanted or uninterested in politics. This is why a dominant discourse on youth apathy and political disconnection has become normalised in common sense social awareness as well in the academic world (Carmouché, 2012; Manning, 2014). However, recent research points to the fact that the disenchantment and low rates of participation in elections reflected in quantitative studies are a product of an excessively restrictive predominant view of the political field which is commonly held in society (Quintelier, 2007; Manning, 2014). In fact, the notion of politics that is still dominant in the political field in liberal democracies dates back to the first instance of liberal thinking formulated in the Scottish Enlightenment (Manning, 2013). The liberal model of politics is based on the public-private divide; it favours the institutionalised forms of political participation and keeps the activities of the political parties and electoral politics at its centre (O'Toole et al., 2010; Manning, 2013, 2014).

In a revisionist take on the dominant model, some qualitative research has helped clarify what youth think about politics and how they understand civic engagement, resulting in a questioning of the myth of youth "political apathy" (O'Toole et al., 2010; Carmouché, 2012). This change is related to the actual evolution of certain social sciences that have incorporated new theoretical and methodological approaches to analyse youth's current reality. The new methodological strategies have helped highlight youth discourses and narratives (Benedicto & Morán, 2015). Instead of normalising the question of youth apathy, activists' narratives afford a more complex perspective for understanding how the political disengagement of young people is built along the lines of race, class and gender and the role played by the main pillars of power and privilege in how youth's political disengagement is shaped (Gordon & Taft, 2011). Moreover, these studies suggest that young people are not totally apathetic or always reluctant to commit themselves but may reject the practices of traditional politics that tend to ignore them and their needs and in whose institutions they have no say or influence (Harris et al., 2010; Cammaerts et al., 2014; Chryssochoou & Barrett, 2017). In this context, the alleged apathy would have to be interpreted as a sign that participation occurs in places other than political institutions, places where people feel a greater sense of autonomy and control (Harris, 2001), "spaces for experience" which enables them to live according to

their principles (Pleyers, 2019) and in which they can exercise their sovereignty by creating alternative social worlds and practices (Riley et al., 2013).

In this respect, there is evidence to show that political and social participation does indeed take place but not in the way and in the places on which analysts were likely to do research up to recent times (Rainsford, 2017). The truth is that many young people cut off from conventional politics are in fact politicised, but in different ways (Varela et al., 2015; Quéniart, 2016), which are often not the object of polls in quantitative research (Quintelier, 2007). As Norris declared several decades ago, in young people's political activism, the politics of loyalties has been dropped in favour of the politics of choice, and, at the same time, it has become more common for citizens to focus on specific causes (Norris, 2004). This shift has occurred in the context of decline of political parties and a breakdown in their role as mediator between civil society and political institutions (Mair, 2013). Faced with a liberal political model, many young activists are redrawing the boundaries of political action, blurring the reference points between private spaces and daily life and collective political spaces, broadening the record of political participation and deinstitutionalising the scenarios for implementing their commitment. In this way, what we are witnessing are attempts to expand the political field in the blurred limits between society and politics, with the result that political orientations and expressions are increasingly manifesting themselves through people's daily lives. The "other possible world" begins with local and personal changes (Pleyers, 2019). This means that problems of a political nature concerning people are becoming more diversified and no longer respond only to traditional politics (Soler i Martí, 2012).

3 Struggle for Citizenship

Are young activists located on the fringes of the liberal political field failed citizens? In our perspective, the alternative forms of young people's political participation are related to the possibility of emerging forms of citizenship building. A criticism of the dominant frameworks in classical studies on youth, political participation and citizenship is that they take a top-down approach, building political participation in terms of traditional forms of engagement like voting or joining a political party. When political participation is defined in such a limited way, the logic of the dominant framework concludes that if young people do not vote, they are flawed citizens. However, what has been defined as political disaffection should be renamed as institutional disaffection (Soler i Martí, 2012) and new ways of relating to politics (Parés, 2014). The traditional citizenship frameworks fail to reflect the different ways in which young people understand and act on social networks and political issues. Young people are in an unequal relationship with traditional political structures. Engaging with the prevailing system is, for some of them, like supporting a political model with which one may be in disagreement and accepting a subordinate position in it (Harris, 2001). Thus, the decision taken by many young people to aim their political energy at the building of spaces of participation and of

citizenship models not linked to the state, on the fringes of the liberal political field, makes sense and is further reinforced by a perceived ineffectiveness of the democratic system in relation to issues that affect them directly (Riley et al., 2013). This perception must be understood in the framework of a generalised distrust of governance institutions and practices, caused by the progressive loss of control by citizens over states and markets. Political institutions are increasingly powerless to transform private suffering into public problems (Bauman, 2001). The feeling of disenchantment is particularly acute in younger generations who do not feel the weight of political tradition. The consequence of the rupture between citizens and governments has led to a "hollowing" of representative democracy in Europe (Mair, 2013) and, in short, to the current legitimacy crisis of liberal democracy (Castells, 2018).

The processes of neoliberal globalisation and the repositioning of the states in the new and complex networks of global power have brought with them citizenship building practices far removed from formal citizenship defined in relation to the state (Sassen, 2003). Citizenship, which in the liberal paradigm has been described as a frame of elements that interrelate the individual case and the state's political and legal system, has been radically transformed. The result is that, beyond formal rights – and as a consequence of the decline of the same – multiple dynamics and non-formalised citizenship actors which develop alternative practices and constructs have gained relevance. Women who, de facto, continue to have limited access to citizenship, migrants excluded from it, young people who live in situations of mass precariousness and ethnic or national groups in situations of political subordination or social marginalisation are some of the groups engaged in said practices.

A consequence of such processes is that, within the current political field, tensions arise between the notion of citizenship as a formal legal condition and citizenship as a project or aspiration (Sassen, 2003), between citizenship as a status and citizenship as a practice (Isin, 2009; Morán & Benedicto, 2016). The disputes unfolding in the political field in order to establish a legitimate definition of citizenship have forced social analysis to build new, more elaborate conceptual instruments intended for understanding increasingly complex and diverse realities (Isin, 2009). Such instruments aim at responding to principles of greater inclusivity and diversity. This has given rise to new concepts such as multicultural citizenship which alludes to minority group rights (Kymlicka, 1996); digital citizenship, as a new form of participation and political commitment (Mossberger et al., 2008); consumer citizenship (Kyroglou & Henn, 2017); "multi-layered" citizenship (Yuval Davis, 2010), understood as a multi-layered construct – local, ethnic, national, state, supra-state, etc.; intimate citizenship, associated with women's sexual and reproductive rights (Yuval Davis, 2011); and many other types of practices.

The wealth of increasingly diverse conceptual repertoires to describe the multiple dimensions of citizenship practices illustrates the fluid and dynamic nature of the institution of citizenship, which must be theorised by inevitably linking it to the social and political struggle that is part of it (Isin, 2009). Thus, citizen "sites" are fields for contesting – which can operate at a variety of levels – in which subjects, interests and positions converge and in which new actors aspire to become political

subjects. It must be remembered that, although citizenship has undergone significant changes, it is still an institution of domination and empowerment. At the same time, the "acts" of citizenship are constituent, the acts themselves producing the subjects, producing them, moreover, while questioning the law and interrupting the practices and regulations governing the political field. These acts of citizenship transform the political forms and modes of being as they create new actors as "activist citizens". As Isin points out (2009), unlike the "active citizen", who acts according to prescribed guidelines in the political field – voting, paying taxes, etc. – the figure of the "activist citizen" calls into question the nature of a given political field, opening up its limits and participating in writing a script and creating a scene, that is to say redefining the hitherto prevailing legitimate logic in the political field.

Currently, the permanent tensions generated by the dynamics of citizen inclusion and exclusion are produced in a political field that is marked, on the one hand, by the cultural individualisation processes of late modernity and, on the other, by neoliberal economic policies whose logic has increasingly prevailed in them. Both forces come together and are interdependent in the political field. Indeed, youth participation (Touraine, 1997) is one of the spheres clearly reflecting the processes of individualisation and deinstitutionalisation that have been affecting the political field and dimensioning it in recent decades (Bauman, 2001; Beck, 1996; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Furlong & Cartmel, 2007). Said processes of individualisation provoke changes in the political field towards what Beck and Beck-Gernsheim call "self-politics" (2002) and Giddens call "life politics" (1991). They are political action models seeking to respond to the increasingly restricted options for democratic agency in the face of neoliberal capitalism and encourage forms of politicisation of leisure, consumption and daily life as a means to affirm people's political agency and their self-realisation (Riley et al., 2013; Kyroglou & Henn, 2017). Thus, the restructuring of the political field is accompanied by the emergence in younger generations of forms of citizenship no longer linked to elections but to individualised engagements and related to ways of life which up till now were considered "non-political": lifestyles, diet routines and recycling, internet activities, consumer habits and cultural options (Amnå et al., 2009). These practices reflect a progressive shift to new niches of activity and identity. Activist culture itself has changed; it is increasingly based on more individualised modalities, far removed from the conventional actors of institutionalised civil society, and which combine a great sensitivity to global challenges and a powerful subjective dimension of the commitment itself (Pleyers, 2016).

On the other hand, the withdrawal from conventional politics to individualised repertoires in daily life (Manning, 2014) is consistent with the type of citizenship fomented by neoliberal policies. In this respect, neoliberal rhetoric has significant implications for both the shaping of people's subjectiveness and their forms of socio-political participation. Through discourses on freedom of choice and responsibility, neoliberal argumentation understands citizens as being bound by the values of self-control, management and entrepreneurship, giving rise to the ideal of the autonomous, rational citizen, a risk manager and somebody responsible for their own destiny (Ong, 2006). In this way, the concept of citizenship shifts from a series

of rights provided by the state to its citizens to a series of responsibilities which the former must take on, among others responsibility for their own welfare by participating in the market (Riley et al., 2013). The logic of neoliberal subjectivity therefore creates a series of favourable conditions so that a whole range of informal activities linked to youth leisure (Pfaff, 2009; Riley et al., 2013), consumption (Kyroglou & Henn, 2017) and daily life can become spaces of political activity.

However, the individualisation of the lives of youth and their alleged freedom of choice have a flip side. Many young people, forced to design and build their life story outside the haven of the institutions (Beck, 1996) by drawing on their own resources and skills, are often deprived of these means. Thus, for the majority of young people, current youth transitions develop in a situation of precariousness as regards their labour conditions and economy (Santamaría, 2018), considerable uncertainty and the absence of biographical linearity (Furlong et al., 2006; Furlong & Cartmel, 2007). In fact, the tendency to consider the complexity of youth transitions as a symptom of "choice biographies" has helped unmask structures spreading disadvantage and vulnerability that are the result of flexible labour markets (Furlong et al., 2006). In this context, conditions of uncertainty, risk and individualisation often lead many young people to shun political activity. The former likewise give rise to transitory and self-expressive participatory practices, which create new citizenship biographies characterised by weak dynamics and fluid and short-lived commitments (Harris et al., 2010).

As pointed out by Pirni and Rafini (2016), the risk we run by placing too much emphasis on the individual and on sanctioning the total disappearance of the collective dimension is to foment an epistemological fallacy, by supposing that the process of individualisation implies the fading of the influence of the structures. The traditional forms of social stratification still hold the key to understanding life's possibilities, despite the fact that the subjective awareness of the influence of such structures has diminished accordingly as life experiences become more individualised (Furlong & Cartmel, 2007; Gozzo & Sampugnaro, 2016). It is common for youth activism to be linked to ideas like creation, reflexive judgement and sense of agency – Bang, for example, speaks of citizens who are creators of daily life, "everyday makers" (2010). Nonetheless, the creative nature attributed to young activists must be understood within the framework of the constraints imposed by structural factors on a social group like youth. Young people do not form an internally homogeneous collective; they are characterised, on the one hand, by elements of social differentiation – implied by power resources, such as age, social class, gender, racialisation and migrant status – and, on the other, by political traditions and the institutional conditions of each particular context. It would be more precise to speak of *youths* rather than youth, in order to analyse the complex forms of being a "politicised youth" and understand the diverse oppressions acting on these subjects (Ballesté & Feixa, 2019). Consequently, differences in families and access to resources, in terms of finance, relations and knowledge, as well as the institutionalised or informal opportunities of the political field and its determinations, must be taken into consideration in the participatory practices of young people and in their level of politicisation. Gender, social class and cultural capital are still the best

predictors of political participation, both at the institutional and informal level (Quintelier, 2007; Hustinx et al., 2012; Mascheroni, 2015).

The dispositions and skills socially incorporated by young people as *habitus* (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Bourdieu, 1994) such as opportunities for participation and experimentation are resources that intervene as forms of capital within the political field. Therefore, they condition participation or inaction. However, it must be noted that not only youth apathy is actively created through multiple processes and points of social exclusion (Gordon & Taft, 2011), but the same applies to participation in activism itself. Analytical tools like intersectionality have helped us to articulately analyse the different systems of domination and subordination and allow us to identify them in the fields of political activism. Thus, in the activist subfield we can see numerous categories of segregation and domination. One of the most common forms of segregation derives from male domination (Larrinaga & Amurrio, 2017). But there are also many other ways. For example, there are young people without experience compared to adults with a long activist career (Ballesté & Feixa, 2019). There are also "expert participants" who use their skills to build networks and cooperate with politicians, elites, interest groups, versus non-expert participants who lack those competences, or migrant participants whose voice is silenced by local activists. All these patterns made up by these binary categories reveal, on the one hand, the complexity of power relations in the activist subfield and, on the other, how hard it is for activist action to reflect the diversity of the players that make it up and the obstacles that hinder their participation, visibility and expression (Dunezat, 2017).

With regard to the differential access to participation resources and the asymmetric acquisition of the necessary dispositions for activism, the analyses developed on the basis of Bourdieu's conceptual formulations likewise point to the need to unravel the structure of opportunities and barriers underlying youth participation, making it possible only for some (Mascheroni, 2015). Thus, these analyses highlight the asymmetric conditions of acquisition of "participatory capital" (Wood, 2014) or of "militant capital" (Matonti & Poupeau, 2004). They also reveal the obstacles that restrict the possibility to build "radical *habitus*", understood as a series of dispositions necessary for activism that imply a particular way to perceive and understand the world, knowledge and the inclination to fight. All these differential dispositions are acquired through participation in criticism and active protest (Crossley, 2003).

4 Methodology

In the empirical research carried out on the political participation of young people in the Basque Country, we used two methodological considerations as our starting point. The first is that, in comparison with quantitative studies, qualitative methodology can offer greater possibilities for perceiving the diversity of young people's emerging participatory repertoires while allowing us to understand the meaning of

politics in their lives (O'Toole et al., 2010; Carmouché, 2012). The second is that, in a context of tension between dominant cultural narratives and counter-hegemonic cultures, qualitative methodology is more suitable for identifying heretical discourses.

Consequently, our study takes as a basis qualitative methodology, through in-depth interviews carried out on young people from different regions of the Basque Country in Spain, throughout 2018. We started off with a sample made up of 22 young people, between the ages of 18 and 35, who had defined themselves as activists or committed people. However, in the narratives of the young people committed to civic and political participation, it was observed that the participatory practices have diverse orientations as far as their innovative capacity is concerned. In this respect, we saw that political experimentation and innovation are not typical of young people affiliated to political parties or trade unions, which are centralised and highly bureaucratic organisations, relatively impervious to change and with pre-set patterns of conduct for their militants. For this reason, the final sample selected for the subsequent analysis was reduced to a group of 17 young people – 8 socialised as female and 9 as male – of between 18 and 35, with declared political implication outside the sphere of political parties.

With an aim to obtaining the greatest possible diversity in discourses, apart from geographical origin, also taken into account were the size of the town of origin; social origin, indirectly stated in the conversations (nine were from working class families and eight from middle class families); the type of school they had attended – public, private, religious, all-Basque, etc.; and employment history. Ten of the young people were working or had worked, with varying degrees of intermittence and precariousness. Thirteen of the interviews were held in Basque and four in Spanish. All the young people had post-secondary studies or were currently studying.

They were people committed to different causes, civic organisations and a wide variety of movements, related to socioecology, the feminist movement, the revitalisation of Basque, self-managed space and squats, youth assemblies, student bodies, refugee reception, social economy groups, popular organisations for the right to decide the political status of the Basque Country, anti-racist movements, groups against social exclusion, the LGTBI movement and organisations involved in popular festivities. Nonetheless, it should be noted that multi-activism defines many of the people interviewed, so some of them are involved in more than one cause or participate in more than one organisation or movement. Moreover, this collective is characterised by their early political socialisation, particularly in left-wing Basque nationalist community spheres, and also by its intense activist experience, not only in organisations but also in more informal and varied participatory spaces, in which weaker institutional regulation allows for more space for creativity and experimentation.

The interviews are part of wider research in which 31 in-depth interviews were carried out and 4 discussion groups were held between young people from the Basque Country, with varying forms and degrees of civic and political engagement (Larrinaga et al., 2020; Larrinaga et al., 2021).

5 Basque Activist Youth: Participation and Innovation on the Fringes of the Political Field

The forms of participation prioritised by the more innovative young people imply an intensification of politicisation in the field of daily life. They focus their concern and interest on daily activities, as they consider that the political system fails to offer opportunities for satisfying their needs. The politicisation of private spheres of action is an element of the political culture inherited from Basque activism linked to both the Francoist underground period and the subsequent policies of popular and national construction. This culture has been characterised by counter-hegemonic political sectors in their fight against the Spanish state. However, this element of continuity now contains more individualised features. Thus, the initiatives of the new generations are starting to weaken the supremacy held by the political parties and organisations and are gradually giving greater importance to practices carried out in the fields of daily life – despite the fact that many young activists retain their membership of different bodies. In this way, they attribute political meaning to ordinary activities and choices: the language they use to communicate, how relations between people and the relations of domination and subordination they face are shaped, the type of job they choose, their forms of consumption, the model of relationship with nature, the freedom to develop their sexuality, the opportunities for building individual and collective identities, etc. The actions developed in all these spaces are turned into ethical and political actions in the life of the young activists. The attribution of political meaning takes the participatory repertoires beyond conventional political institutions and extends the political field beyond the limits of liberal democratic systems.

> I turned my militancy around (…) In my opinion, that change in the political cycle had an impact. It's not just the fact that ETA had laid down its arms. I think it coincides with the transformation processes in the twenty first century (…) I believe that the fact that the political conflict is no longer so intense, though it persists, has helped. (Female, 27, feminist group)

> In my view, politics can be done from anywhere: in your group of friends, in your job, in your place of study… And you don't need to belong to any particular structure or organisation (…) politics exists outside political parties (…). And this is only growing in strength, from what I can see around me. (Female, 26, left-wing nationalist youth organisation)

Generally speaking, young Basque activists have a strong sense of political agency and a great capacity for reflection. Nonetheless, they are unaware of the pillars of privilege that enable them to be that way, unlike other young people alienated from politics: their early socialisation in the family and community in highly politicised fields, pre-existing informal and organisational networks which have multiplied their opportunities for participation, the accumulated political capital in the shape of

participatory dispositions and skills and, in many cases, the differential cognitive resources linked to social origin or their educational level.

With this agency status as their starting point, they gradually began to shun the intermediation of conventional political organisations where they had their first learning in politics. In some cases, it implies a generational, political rupture as regards interests and political agenda. On the other hand, they believe that all social change begins with the transformation of oneself and with one's actions, be they related to language, sexuality, consumer and diet habits or life and work alternatives. In their opinion, politics is not an external sphere separated from daily life in which people need to integrate in order to reach their objectives. On the contrary, according to this conception, what is public and private, the self and daily life are closely interconnected in political action. Young activist people aspire to become political subjects, not in the way that politicians and institutions do, but rather by building their lives in their own fashion. With the increase in the number of political practices based on the individual and daily existence, this action framework entails an individualisation of political repertoires and, in parallel, a weakening of institutional models – to which they are largely heirs, as regards the acquisition of participatory dispositions.

> I think that, generally speaking, there is a break, or difference, between the old and new generations (…) I think that the "old" sector is living its struggle (…) We young people are working on other channels (…) I can see that we are immersed in the fight for a new model of life. I have been active because my parents were left-wing nationalist sympathisers. What I mean is, I am not disputing that perspective. I think they have made an enormous contribution and that's why we are here. Otherwise there would not be such an interest in activism in the Basque Country (…) But, in some aspects, I feel a little distant (…) That's why I am squatting (…) some among us are ready to quit this model imposed by capitalism (…) Young people's lives are not bad because the Basque Country is not independent (…), young people's lives are bad because they have no money for studying (…) Errekaleor [a community of squats] is just one example. I attach greater importance to that than to ethnicity. (Male, 20, student organisation)

> You realize that young people are not the future, we are also the present. And our opinion must also be heard now. (Female, 25, platform for the right to decide in the Basque Country)

> Where I buy my oranges is political. Or who I buy my milk from is also political. Because we can have an impact with these little things (…) That's why I say that everything is political, that all the little decisions we make are political. (Male, 35, socioecology group)

In such a context, on what do young activists focus their energy? As already mentioned, they do not focus, in the main, on areas of institutionalised politics, although some of them still maintain formal links with it. On the contrary, in a context of progressively individualised culture, their political participation has predominantly taken hold in spaces where they have the chance to develop an opposing force, autonomy and control. In fact, young people channel their activity in the spheres in

which they can put their sovereignty into practice; in them, they try to build social spaces and alternative forms of life. To this end, their citizenship building is based on the demands for core values like autonomy and sovereignty.

In this respect, their political practices point to a quest for coherence between values and actions. Their commitment is underpinned by this premise, as evidenced by many of their statements. Therefore, through their own action, young people can put their beliefs, values and ideals into practice and, consequently, ensure consistency between what they think and what they do. Equality, cooperation, solidarity, justice, ecology, food sovereignty, fair trade, linguistic equality, feminism, freedom, anticapitalism, social transformation and other values mentioned in the interviews are not, for the young activists, banal principles, devoid of content, but rather guidelines for the action they take in their lives.

> We drew up a list of values, and built our work around them. (Male, 33, organisation involved in popular festivities)

> At first, the starting point was which type of Astra [name of the self-managed space] we wanted. And then it was decided what we should be, from the ideological point of view: intercultural, feminist, antimilitarist…. (Female, 30, self-managed cultural space)

In an outlook on life which seems to implicate personal life and political action, the world of work and leisure are a further chapter in the commitment of young activists. There is no doubt that their implication must be understood as a *continuum* in their life space and time. Therefore, leisure and social relations and, on certain occasions, their professional activity too seem to be included in the commitment. By affording an ethical sense to their job choice, they redefine the meaning of work. In that way, in young people's experience, work seems associated with values like sustainability, care for others and justice and also with the possibilities for creative self-expression. Consequently, participation no longer seems delimited in the dimensions of time and space, and there is no time break in their commitment between one political action and another. On the contrary, participation appears to be deeply engrained in daily activity, and engagement has been broadened to take in all spheres and moments of personal life.

> For me, there is no limit, I do not know how to set limits between my work and social commitment. What I mean is, when am I working and when am I being an activist? It's all one thing nowadays, so…, I would say that it is not work, it is a passion, and I am paid to satisfy my passion. (Male, 27, association for the revitalisation of Basque)

> Politically, I have given up organizational activism. Currently, I am not in any [organizational] structure. But I understand that my life is much more politicized, because, for example, all my food comes from baskets from sustainable consumption groups. As for leisure, I give a lot of thought to what, why and all that. I try to interpret all my relations through a more political lens. My work is political. We do politics when we offer a service, or we help another cooperative. And the work itself is an instrument for doing politics within [the company]. (Female, 25, social economy and processing cooperative)

The commitment of young innovative activists has an impact on the development of the self and on the building of both individual and collective identities. Their

implication is aimed not only at others but also at themselves, insofar as participation helps build the young person's identity. Undoubtedly, in innovative activism, this construction is part of a process of reflection on oneself and one's life journey, in accordance with the consequences of the progressive deinstitutionalisation of current society, including the loss of influence of Basque political parties on young people as providers of civic and political identities. In this way, for politicised young people, political commitment contributes to the building and strengthening of their image; it helps them develop their self-esteem and reinforce a positive and empowered representation of themselves. In consequence, we can appreciate parallel processes in young activists, in relation to continuity and to rupture with political traditions that have been transmitted to them in the Basque political field. On the one hand, there has been a watering down of inherited identities and strong political loyalties, even when they formally admit to being heirs to them. There is likewise an evident rejection of pre-built political and ideological "packs". On the other hand, there is increased reflection on oneself and one's actions in the activity carried out with others.

> The League is a nonpartisan association. Yes, we are anticapitalist and feminist. But we cannot advocate [for a political organisation]. Yes, obviously, we need to have an ideology, but it is not homogeneous (…) Our main interest is in our identities, our orientations and an acceptance of them. (Female, 21, LGTBI)

> You have your concerns, why you do things, etc. And, with time, you put your mind in order, and you ask yourself what we are doing. (Male, 33, organisation of popular festivities)

> I myself began to reflect on my identity and my position. (Female, 27, feminist group)

In this respect, political participation enables young people with greater political capital to question predominant values and relations in society and broaden their life options through new experiences. Moreover, activist experience encourages them to rethink their previously held positions, to trust in themselves and reposition themselves in the political field and, on certain occasions, to overcome their previous limitations; this is the case of young feminists who are empowered and resocialised on the basis of renewed principles, rewriting their life story in a thoughtful way, or of other activists who are capable of analysing in a self-reflective fashion some of their privileges in the activist field. The contributions made by feminists are undoubtedly one of the clearest influences on innovation in current Basque youth activism and are increasingly incorporated into innovative young people's activist *habitus*.

> The youth movement was a time of "let's think about ourselves, let's focus on relations (…) and move on from the response stage". I don't know, it was focusing on other key areas, ready to move onto a more constructive stage. Then, although we didn't use those terms at that time, an important base was feminism. And not looking so much to the external world to see how to change it, but rather to our interior, to see which roles, which power relations we were replicating among ourselves (…) I discovered a patriarchal structure (…), I identified the power relations, male dominance, and the differential difficulties we have had as women. (Female, 27, feminist group)

As we have seen, working on oneself, living on the basis of one's own values and learning from this process are required tasks for young activists in the individualised society. In a time when social institutions find it harder than before to regulate people's lives – among the former being political parties and organisations which continue to play the key role in counter-hegemonic activity in Basque society – acting politically is not just an individual or collective action in favour of political and social change. It is also an experience of personal emancipation, which plays a decisive role in learning about oneself and building identity. In addition, on many occasions, activism helps young people to build an identity that ensures satisfaction and pleasure. Indeed, young activists frequently refer in their declarations to the social integration enabled by political participation and the symbolic gratification it implies for the young people participating. Unquestionably, the interviews reveal that the feelings of social and personal realisation give meaning to participation and reinforce the latter just as much as it does the cause being pursued. Thus, in youth transitions, activism has opened the doors to young participants for their integration in different groups; it has given them the opportunity to organise sociability networks in interaction with other young people, to share with them their emotions, to feel satisfaction in the struggles they consider legitimate and, in short, to create a community and ways of belonging which are "family"-like in progressively individualised contexts. There is no doubt that political participation is a mechanism that generates meaning and impregnates all spheres of the life of the young, committed person. In consequence, symbolic gratification often turns into a source of motivation, in order to go forward with the activism.

> I was very motivated from the start. I soon realised that this was my place (…) there was so much hope and joy, everything was wonderful, people were seen to be highly motivated, working with great enthusiasm (...) At the same time it was very hard (...) But (...) I found my place, I saw that it was worthwhile, that what we did delivered results (…) At that time friendships were built, and I spent a lot of time with them, and each action empowered us a little more, we saw we could, and that was lovely. (Female, 25, platform for the right to decide in the Basque Country)

Individualisation and collective sense are linked in the activists' discourses. By participating and putting their political commitment into practice, the young people interviewed are declaring their intention to act together with others. Unlike its frequent interpretation as a concept of individualisation that weakens the possibilities of collective action, the intentions of the young Basque innovators expressed in the interviews would appear to indicate that individualised political practices have a collective dimension. Thus, individualisation and collectivism establish two core areas in new youth activism, one of continuity with the community and participatory politics tradition still prevailing in a significant part of Basque society and another of disconnection with said tradition. The participatory *habitus* ingrained in the spheres of political learning of Basque counter-hegemonic tradition maintains its continuity in the basic momentum aimed at participation and commitment transmitted to new activist generations. However, this participatory *habitus* seems to have been tailored to the new structural conditions of the current political field. Specifically, collective regulations have been weakened. The collective is no longer

of fixed consistency; its forms are far more diverse. In the absence of valid behaviour patterns for the new situation, the young people with activist *habitus* are obliged to build other ties of belonging in their interaction with others, for them to be recognised in a group, to create links in communities of interest and take part in collective actions in favour of different causes. Thus, activist engagement provides the young participants with the feeling of belonging to a group. In this aspect, participation is structuring; it affords them the opportunity to satisfy their individual and collective identity needs and to perceive that they have found "their place" in the world. Generally speaking, this sense of belonging does not refer to the state and, sometimes, not even to the Basque institutional political field, but rather to more informal and local communities, or simply to micropolitics which spring up locally but are connected to global action rationale.

> I have never formed part of any collective because I was not one hundred per cent in agreement with the ideals or what was being upheld, but I am here. We are learning together from each other. We have a debating club. So, if I have any doubts about something, there is a proper way of asking, because there are identity issues that can hurt, and we try and have a debate about it (…) It is something we are building gradually. (Female, 21, LGTBI)

> I think that first year was mainly (…) a squat with eight young persons who understood each other very well, a highly politicized house, with great companionship, a wonderful life in community, a solid centre which had a direct impact on the development of the neighbourhood. (Male, 26, community of self-managed squats)

In this way, though they do have a prior cultural and organisational foundation in Basque society, the new dimensions of community and the collective must be produced and reproduced by the activists themselves under the new political and social conditions of the second modernity. In doing so, young people have lost the linearity of their life story; they are obliged to have at their disposal the participatory skills and resources that help them form networks, establish alliances and negotiate with others at a variety of levels. At the same time, these networks allow them to cope with the lack of stability and the uncertainty generated in the current economic and social environment. An example of the same are the feminist proposals which advocate decentralised, diverse and flexible organisational forms that facilitate the harmonisation of collective collaboration as well as the defence of the complexity of activist identities.

> In my opinion, there is a lot to learn, for example, from the feminist movement. Because we, the young generations in the feminist movement, are uniting and organising ourselves. I think there is a permeability, a greater scope for testing and getting it right (…) And another thing, for being able to work from your own identity, and respond to, and reflect on, your own problems, starting from yourself. I think that feminism offers theoretical instruments for that: how the different systems of exploitation and domination intersect, and what position women, young women, black women … hold. And then, maybe we need more flexible forms of relationship, that is, with the possibility to come together and then separate, instead of working like a rigid structure, working like an octopus, with different ramifications, which acts depending on the needs at every given moment. (Female, 27, feminist group)

Consequently, in our view, the forms of individualisation identified in the experiences of the young innovative activists are collaborative. In point of fact, the will to act together with others characterises the attempts to define their identities in a self-sufficient fashion, always in cooperation with others. Logically, this task is made easier in such social contexts as have a very dense and consistent community – life-medium and small-sized towns in Basque society, highly mobilised neighbourhoods in big cities – and in those where the political tradition of self-organisation lives on.

> The squat happened because we needed a place. In fact, Gernika has always been an active [town], there have always been lots of associations and social movements (…) The conditions stated that it [the cultural space] be managed by the people, that the council have no say, and that it be self-managed. That's why a process got underway, a participatory process in the town. (Female, 30, self-managed cultural space)

In general, the youth political practices studied among young Basque activists can be considered laboratories of social innovation which, from the fringes of the political field, compete to broaden or substitute prevailing forms of citizenship with other alternatives. The dominant form of citizenship in the twentieth century was built in relation to the state, and it still exists thanks mainly to electoral participation. Opposed to this model, youth activist participation has opened up ways to diversify participation by continued experimentation with alternative life formulas and socio-political models which have shifted politics to personal and social life. These experimental practices by young activists, who seek transformation and emancipation in highly diverse spheres and through very different forms, reveal some common ground but also many turning points. With their creative workshops, their role is prefigurative as they anticipate future models on the fringes of the political and social fields, generating and exchanging knowledge and experience, testing new forms of self-organisation, starting up new cultural and socio-economic projects and rehearsing other forms of relation. In short, they try to break the barriers of what is socially possible.

> When away, we tended to live in communes, altogether, and we organised everything between us, depending on the needs (…) That's where you see that another model of life is possible. (Male, 18, diverse popular initiatives)

> There are currently one hundred or so people squatting (…) Our intention is to take over the means of production little by little and be less and less dependent on the market. On the one hand, strengthening the community, with healthy social relations and, on the other, showing that another model is possible. Most of us living here are young people. (Male, 26, community of self-managed squats)

6 Conclusions

In this text, we have analysed the innovative political practices carried out by young Basque activists on the fringes of the political field as defined in liberal democracies. We considered these practices as active citizenship acts that broaden the sense

of what is political. In this aspect, political participation is shifted to the spheres of daily life, which are transformed into new sites of citizenship.

The analysis has allowed us to demonstrate the importance of the particular socio-political context for the development of innovative political participation by young activists. The transformation of the young participants into citizens who are activist subjects has as its background a very particular structure for political opportunity in the Basque political field: a longstanding, counter-hegemonic and activist culture of community politics, linked to "nation building" projects. This is the culture in which they were socialised at an early age and which has allowed them to acquire political *habitus* prone to transformative and creative participation as well as the appropriate dispositions for identifying and interpreting the opportunities offered by the political field.

Despite seeing themselves as heirs to this tradition, many young activists have pursued the exploration of areas less regulated in terms of organisation and have carried out political experiments following a more individualised programme, in which self-fulfilment and socio-political commitment, daily micropolitics and collective activism combine. In this respect, their participatory *habitus* has adapted to the new political, cultural and structural conditions of societies typical of the second modernity. Heritage and experimentation are combined in their practices.

Contrary to some approaches that consider individualisation and a sense of the collective as mutually exclusive, we believe that both dimensions are present in the innovative activist practices of Basque youth. Having observed their experience, we defend the idea that individualised politics and personal life projects can be orientated and require the collaboration and cooperation between equals in order for them to be carried out. Nonetheless, collective orientation does not exist per se. On the contrary, it requires the young people involved to possess the necessary relational and cognitive resources in order to build networks and collaboration links in participatory practices, as is the case with the young people in the study.

In this respect, we can corroborate the evidence that has been shown in numerous research projects on the structural restrictions conditioning youth participation and the possibilities of an activist citizenship. In fact, the young innovative activists in our study are a minority, equipped with great political capital, even more activist capital. However, their narratives only reveal gender biases as main points of exclusion within the activist subfield itself.

Despite the fact that the young people interviewed come from different social and family backgrounds, we believe that they share an element that has ironed out these differences: early exposure to participation in politicised community settings and longstanding activist experience, which has enabled them to act autonomously and take chances in their innovative political initiatives. In consequence, we can conclude that, for the individual, the activist experience is, in itself, a cognitive activity that generates critical capacity and skills for building reality, particularly in spheres with weak institutional regulation. Moreover, socially, the opportunities afforded by the particular socio-political context decisively condition their acquisition. Thus, we feel that the incidence of both factors must be given equal

consideration to other structural resources in the study of the emergence of new activist citizen practices.

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