

Reshaping Youth Participation

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Reshaping Youth Participation: Manchester in a European Gaze

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Foreword

Patricia Loncle

This book is an important contribution for those who wish to understand in detail what youth participation initiatives — formal, non-formal or informal — mean and how they are implemented.

The PARTISPACE research made it possible to reveal both a certain number of characteristics common to these initiatives in the various European cities studied, and strong specificities linked to the local areas in which they took place. These specificities refer to local systems that are largely marked by several elements: nation histories; national difficulties, especially young people's living conditions; the values of national and local public policies in the broad field of social issues and in the more specific field of youth issues; and the state of the relations maintained between public and voluntary actors and with youth associations and groups.

This book offers an in-depth analysis of youth participation in Manchester, placing it in the European context of the PARTISPACE research and considering it alongside other cities studied in PARTISPACE (Gothenburg, Bologna, Frankfurt and Eskişehir). This study supported by the methodologies used in PARTISPACE — an ethnographic approach and participatory action research — the studies collected and presented here are dense and complex. The analysis is also enhanced by the mobilisation of central ideas at the crossroads of sociology and education sciences.

Overall, this book provides a detailed understanding of the local mechanisms at work in youth participation, the dynamics that run through the groups of young people who participate, and the professional and voluntary practices of the actors who accompany them. By considering specific examples of the participation of certain groups of young people (political groups, groups of young people seeking asylum, people with experience of street homelessness, feminists, artists, etc.), this book sets out the challenges encountered by the people involved in youth participation initiatives when they mobilise for their cause and local area, despite knowing that they may still experience social abjection. But, above all, the analysis demonstrates the particularly developed mobilisation capacities of these groups, their inventiveness, their solidarity, their acute understandings of their situations, and the importance of the roles they can play both in favour of the young people they represent and more widely of their local area.

For all these reasons, reading this book will undoubtedly spark debate on the richness of youth participation initiatives in Europe, and will illustrate how young people are capable of renewing repertoires of action and contributing to the various forms of solidarity needed to face major contemporary challenges such as social, political and climate injustice, poverty, and the denial of human rights.

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First, we would like to thank ourselves – Gráinne, Harriet, and Janet – for putting up with ourselves, despite often finding it very difficult to deal with ourselves when we were putting this book together. So thank you to Gráinne, Harriet, and Janet for playing along and being patient with Gráinne, Harriet, and Janet, respectively. We are all very sorry for any difficulties we may have caused all of you.

We would also like to thank colleagues in the Education and Social Research Institute (ESRI) at Manchester Metropolitan University, and the Just Futures Centre and Centre for Citizenship, Conflict, Identity and Diversity (CCID) at the University of Huddersfield, for their support during the PARTISPACE project and the completion of this collection.

Our friends and networks in Manchester, with whom we still work, have been there with us throughout, and we always value their support, candour, and openness. We look forward to our continued work.

Of course, we must thank the contributors to the volume for their excellent chapters, their commitment to the book, and their patience with us when we slowed down our efforts over the pandemic to allow everyone space and time. Thank you for sticking with us, and our ‘slow scholarship’.

And thank you, so much, to the young people who were part of the PARTISPACE study in Manchester and our partner cities in Europe on which the volume is based. We learned more than we could ever have known as we walked alongside you. We are still in contact, and working with, some of you, and we wish you all well for your futures.

Finally, Harriet and Gráinne would like to extend a very special thanks to Janet for her support of and friendship to them over the years – so much could not and would not have happened without your support, Janet, and we would not be the people we are today without you in our lives. Thank you.

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Chapter 1

Introduction to ‘Manchester in a European Gaze’

Harriet Rowley, Janet Batsleer and Gráinne McMahon

The introduction to this edited collection sets out the context within which the current volume is set: Manchester, the city; the PARTISPACE European Project that explored spaces and styles of youth participation in eight cities in Europe; and the spaces of youth participation explored in the book. The chapter begins with a description of Manchester and its representations: its radical history and current status, and how recent contradictions or tensions manifest in everyday life. Drawing on Batsleer’s 30 years of experience of youth work in the city, the chapter recognises how political and social conditions have changed the nature of youth participation and in turn how participation has been shaped by the current policy context.

This chapter will then introduce the situated ethnographic and participatory action research approaches in the PARTISPACE study that enabled the researchers to collaborate with community actors to co-produce knowledge and socially engaged research. Finally, it will introduce the PARTISPACE Manchester case studies included in the volume, and the commentaries from PARTISPACE colleagues in other European cities (who undertook similar work) featured in the book that complement, enhance, and speak to the Manchester case studies.

Between 2015 and 2018, the PARTISPACE research consortium explored spaces and styles of young people’s participation across eight cities in Europe, including a city in Turkey. An edited book collection produced by the consortium already exists (see [Walther, Batsleer et al., 2019](#)), but in each city, there was much more to say than was possible in a single volume. This book is Manchester’s turn.

The City of Manchester

Manchester is known for being the first industrialised city in the UK, but today much of the old industry is gone. The economic recovery and growth of the city are now explained by factors such as an international airport, a relocated centre for the BBC in Salford, the music scene, and sport. Football, with two

world-renowned clubs, has for many years had a significant presence in the life of the city. Since the beginning of the 1980s, Manchester also has had a vibrant music scene that has played a vital role in alternative pop culture. ‘Madchester’ is a well-known saying in the UK and further afield and is used to refer to the music and ‘party scene’ that came out of Manchester in the 1990s.

There are five universities within the city-region of Manchester and another 20 within an hour’s drive. At an estimated 100,000, the student population of the city is claimed to be the largest in Europe. Manchester has a long history of migration inwards, and still many migrants from across the world make their home there. Around 200 languages are spoken, making it one of the most linguistically diverse places in the UK and Europe ([Manchester City Council, 2019](#)). Migrants have historically come from Ireland and the West Indies, and more recently, from African nations, Pakistan, Bangladesh, China, India, and Eastern Europe.

In the 1940s, Greater Manchester was a centre for labour movement activism that included cultural and social activism and young people organising in networks. Youth councils were established at this time – most youth projects were in the voluntary sector and linked to national movements and/or to churches. In this period, the club movement emphasised the club as a training ground for citizenship, with the club committee a model of preparation for democratic citizenship. Greater Manchester was home to several famous early clubs and movements, for example, the Salford Lads Club and the Jewish Youth Movement.

The 1950s and early 1960s saw the emergence of ‘youth culture’ and new venues for young people in Manchester including a civic centre on the Wythenshawe estate, youth centres linked to colleges, and a youth club – the Hideaway – for the first generation of the African Caribbean community in the city. The first dedicated professional training for youth and community workers was established nationally in these years.

The decade that followed was characterised by social liberation with movements such as Women’s Liberation, the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign, and the Gay Liberation movement. Community Service Volunteers, an early organisation that supported young people’s participation through volunteering, was founded in Manchester and early ‘experimental’ youth work projects, based in street outreach work, were established. There was a growing awareness of the failure of youth services to reach significant groups of young people (often the poorest and those with most unmet needs) and detached outreach projects developed rapidly, including a significant Manchester organisation, the Youth Development Trust, founded in 1967. The influence of progressive education ideals was in evidence with new community-based and play-based projects emerging in this period, including very early young women’s projects.

In the late 1970s, new voices emerged to challenge the dominance of certain forms of (white) ‘respectable masculinity’ within the ethos of youth work and youth participation. Manchester youth workers from the Girls Work network participated in ‘Boys Rule not OK’ conferences. Lesbian and gay youth groups were established, at first in relative secrecy, and university/youth work links were developing with significant research projects strengthening youth work in the city. However, 1981 saw riots focusing attention on the policing of the African

Caribbean community in Moss Side and youth centres played a significant role in advocacy for local black communities in the ensuing period.

In the years that followed, some of the key voluntary sector youth organisations were handed over to independent management committees. One was 42nd Street, which worked with young people with mental health and emotional difficulties, and had a dual focus on supporting young people and enabling them to challenge the conditions – in family life, in schools and education, and in psychiatry – that contributed to their distress. Early work challenging homophobia in schools and families and sexual abuse emerged from these projects.

From the late 1990s, an emphasis on tackling social exclusion led to much open access work being replaced by targeted work—participation projects often sought out the most disadvantaged or those who public bodies now had legal obligations to hear. An emphasis on ‘youth voice’ but also on ‘youth nuisance’, with a strengthening of links to police in the city’s youth work strategy, characterised this period. Manchester became known as ASBO (Anti-Social Behaviour Order) City with the development of ‘dispersal zones’ for ‘problematic youth’ as a strategy. Austerity policies since 2010 have led to youth service closures; nonetheless, the 2010s saw the development of a Youth Opportunity Fund and investment in a new generation of buildings: MyPlace Centres/Public Private Partnership, of which Manchester Youth Zone (previously The Factory) is a key example. Following the 2011 riots, youth forums and the youth council were re-established. Most provision was now once more supported through the voluntary sector, and there was further development in that sector with young advisors undertaking ‘youth voice’ work and new forms of youth-led social enterprise, often with an anti-gang and then later, anti-radicalisation focus. Most schools established school councils and at the beginning of the decade, there were youth fora in each area of the city with a direct link with Manchester Youth Council. From 2018, the work of youth work organisations in Manchester itself has been co-ordinated by a new independent trust, ‘Young Manchester’.

This ‘whistlestop tour’ of Manchester’s history shows how the political challenges of key moments shaped and continue to shape youth and community work with young people in Manchester, and the social and political participation of young people. Now, despite being at the centre of the so-called Northern Powerhouse,¹ a lot of people in Manchester, especially the young, face deleterious social conditions. The city has a high child poverty rate (around 145,000 children live in relative poverty in Greater Manchester/equivalent to 1 in 4 in the city region), and many young people struggle to progress towards social and economic independence.² As a result of the UK-wide housing crisis, many young people still live in their parental home until well into their 20s, and youth unemployment is a critical problem. This situation affects ethnic minority groups to a higher degree – some of these communities experience significant levels of poverty. The COVID-19 pandemic has further affected these groups disproportionately and whilst data is still emerging at the time of writing, ‘Generation Z’ or the ‘lost generation’ (those born after 1995) are most likely at risk of poverty and to have been hardest hit by the coronavirus crisis. Previously, ‘Millennials’ – those born after 1981 – were the generation worst hit by the 2008 financial crash and are now

facing (along with everyone else) unprecedented rises in living costs and another possible national recession.

Nonetheless, Greater Manchester's long history of activism has continued. Most recently, Manchester commemorated the 200th anniversary of the Peterloo Massacre, whilst the city has been part of, and hosted, several protests in recent years connected to the most pressing issues of our time – Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, Reclaim the Night, and the impending environmental crisis. Forms of cultural activism and participation, sustained by a vibrant cultural scene, feed and sustain these activities, and though affected by significant funding cuts brought about by austerity, youth and community development work remains strong across the region. This rich history, especially of 'grassroots' forms of activism, cultural participation, and democratic struggle, mean that Manchester represents (though the editors admit that they are biased!) one of the most interesting city studies in the PARTISPACE study. In addition, despite recent changes about where the UK 'sits' in Europe, there is much that is seen better and more clearly in a European gaze. As such, this book enables dialogue with the other cities and partners with whom we worked in PARTISPACE to continue. We now turn to setting out the research study in its entirety.

The PARTISPACE Project

PARTISPACE, a Horizon 2020 funded project that ran from 2015 to 2018, aimed to explore the styles and spaces of young people's participation, and formal, non-formal, and informal contexts and possibilities of young people's participation, in Europe. The study included eight cities across Europe: Bologna (Italy), Frankfurt (Germany), Gothenburg (Sweden), Eskişehir (Turkey), Manchester (UK), Plovdiv (Bulgaria), Rennes (France), and Zurich (Switzerland). The main research stages included reviews of national youth policies, a secondary analysis of the European Social Survey, and a critical discourse analysis of European policy documents, followed by qualitative local studies in each city, consisting of 188 expert interviews, 100 group discussions with young people, 96 biographical interviews with young people, and 48 ethnographic case studies of formal, non-formal, and informal participatory settings. Then, 18 participatory action research projects were conducted by and with young people.

The research started from the assumption that young people do participate but that their forms of participation are not necessarily recognised by those who see only a deficit and an accompanying need to inculturate and educate young people into becoming active and responsible citizens. This assumption was challenged and contested during the empirical research and analysis to enable a broader understanding of youth participation to emerge. The themes that developed from the wider European study centred on the struggle for recognition and the importance of non-formal negotiated and informal self-directed practices of participation, which were also interwoven even in the most formal, representational practices, such as youth congresses, youth forums, and youth councils.

In detail, PARTISPACE followed a classic research cycle. We began by producing a glossary to explore our shared (or different) understandings of some of the

key concepts of the project (e.g. culture, identity, gender), alongside generating a 'state of the art' of young people's participation in the eight participating countries (young people's lives, youth policies, and youth socio-political participation). This initial stage was followed by developing a background 'expert review' of young people's participation in each of the cities (188 expert interviews). This part of the work enabled us to build up a detailed picture of the youth participation 'scene' in each city according to individuals who worked with young people in various spaces, who established spaces for youth participation, or who were considered 'leaders' in youth groups.

The next stage of the work involved identifying spaces of youth participation, developing shared protocols for empirical research, and making decisions about the ethnographic engagements in each of the cities that might enable a fruitful exploration. Each of the eight cities identified six groups or spaces for the case studies, ensuring that, across the cities, the sample included an even distribution of formal, informal, and non-formal spaces (48 cases studies in all). All cities included the city youth council in its ethnographies. Some of the 18 participatory action research projects developed out of the ethnographic case studies, and some came to the project as participatory action research projects only.

Crucially, though PARTISPACE reported early on about young people's participation in Europe when we explored national contexts and policies and spoke with local 'experts' about participation in the eight cities, the study aimed to avoid establishing a set definition of 'participation' in any of its forms. Instead, the approach allowed our understandings of participation to develop from our observations of participatory spaces and our work alongside young people in the youth-led participatory action research projects. The ethnographies of the spaces set out to use a 'grounded theory' methodology to support a 'tabula rasa' approach (in so far as such a method is possible, see, for example, [Thornberg, 2012](#)), whilst the participatory action research projects supported the young people's own explorations and understandings of participation.

The final stage of the project involved a detailed analysis of the learning about young people's participation during the project, set across a set of thematic ideas: the styles (how young people 'do' and 'live' participation), spaces (urban spatial factors), biographies (told stories and life trajectories), and local conditions (local youth policies, and how they are reflected by different forms of formal participation) of youth participation.³

The UK Research Team

The research team from the UK, comprising academics from Manchester Metropolitan University, University of Huddersfield, and the University of Central Lancashire, came from a variety of backgrounds – sociology, education, youth and community work, and social work – and parts of the world – Britain, Portugal, Wales, and Ireland. During the PARTISPACE project, it was Janet Batsleer's bringing everyone together, across expansive epistemological traditions in the European team, that underscored a palpable streak of anti-scientism in the UK team, as well as a radical commitment to enable what we found here in our empirical studies

to change, modify, and challenge our own theoretical assumptions. Similarly, in the spirit of efforts to co-produce research, the UK maintained a commitment to the importance of struggle, civility, and what Stuart Hall called ‘the current conjuncture’. In Batsleer’s words at the final sharing event we held in Manchester with partners who had been engaged in the research (March, 2018), we could not have done the PARTISPACE project in Manchester without acknowledging what was happening around us and through us. In this sense we tried to capture the micropolitics of Manchester, and what we were seeing and hearing in our daily lives, all reflective of broader structural processes of which Manchester is part.

It is here that our ‘anti-scientism streak’ allowed us to truly engage in the spaces around us. For the final local event in Manchester, we produced a pamphlet showcasing our work. It was entitled ‘We are here’ and was produced in a short accessible format detailing each of our case studies. We described it as our ‘song of affection and gratitude to the partners we had worked with in Manchester’. We hope that you can see this commitment in the chapters in the current volume.

Setting the Context of Manchester in a European Gaze

Using a lens of ‘youth’ means that insights into democracy and citizenship, self-organising and protest movements, and arts activism as engaged social activism, are necessarily emergent. In addition, there is also a tussle between forms of participation and engagement that predominantly enable young people to have a strong voice within existing systems and forms of expression, and an appropriation of space and voice that are not aligned with existing systems and instead trouble existing systems or regard them as obstacles.

Key ideas that appear throughout the book concern the participation of young people in ‘adult spaces’, of young people who are pursuing a new politics and ideological change, of marginalised young people, and of young people utilising the creative arts as a ‘lived politics’. Throughout this book, readers will find reference to and engagement with a range of theoretical resources, many of which we engaged with for the first time during the PARTISPACE research, that allowed us to consider the styles, spaces, contradictions, conflicts, ambivalences, and hopes of young people’s participation.

The theoretical orientations drawn upon here vary as much as the spaces of youth participation described in the volume. It would be futile to try to summarise these theoretical perspectives here in any depth. In all, however, there was a definitive sense of young people wanting to do things differently. This desire involved engaging in new and emancipatory forms of learning (Freire, 1972/2007; hooks, 1994), and in active and autonomous spaces of learning and participation (Percy-Smith et al., 2019b). Young people stressed the importance of being able to self-organise around issues that are biographically meaningful (Cuconato et al., 2018; McMahon et al., 2019) and personal-political (Hanisch, 1970), to do politics and democracy differently (Beck, 2018; Mouffe, 1999; Young, 2000), and to live counter-hegemonic alternatives (Gramsci, 1991a, 1991b, 1991c). These ambitions also involved a determination to be in public and to be heard in public

(Fraser, 1990) and to harness the power of fragility and vulnerability in resistance (Bourbeau, 2018). Where young people were engaged in creative participation, they wanted to move beyond normative or dominant creative practices (Born, 2017), and to utilise creative means for political messaging (Değirmenci, 2006) even when the risks of such practices were manifest. These and related perspectives guide the contributors' understandings of what they 'saw' in the youth participation spaces.

The contributions to the current book are based on the six ethnographies and three participatory action research projects that took place in Manchester, and four 'commentaries' from complementary chapters in partner cities in Europe. The commentaries seek to draw out prominent themes from the chapters in each section whilst offering complementary case study material from other European cities included in the study to embed the work in a broader European context. Even after the end of the PARTISPACE funding, many of the community partnerships with the people and spaces involved in youth participation in Manchester continued as they had done before PARTISPACE, whilst in some cases, further projects began. This continued engagement extended our understandings and is further elaborated in the '(not a) Conclusion' (Chapter 15).

The Current Volume

The book is structured in four sections that broadly move across the spectrum of formal, informal, and non-formal modes of participation as per the heuristic used in the broader PARTISPACE study. In each section, the first two chapters focus on either an ethnographic case study or participatory action research project of youth participation in Manchester. The third chapter in each section is a 'commentary' chapter about a project in a partner city. The commentary chapters explore a space similar to the Manchester cases and enable a consideration of the Manchester cases in a 'European gaze', and are included from Gothenburg, Frankfurt, Bologna, and Eskişehir (in order of appearance).

Section 1 of the book, '(Non)Formal Spaces for Representation and Democracy', outlines formal modes of youth participation in Manchester and then in Gothenburg. The chapters describe how formal modes of participation are still viewed as important spaces for representation, democracy, and change-making, yet are characterised by ambivalence and conflict where young people must negotiate with adults and navigate adult-led structures in order to find their place and voice.

In Chapter 2, Stuart Dunne and James Duggan utilise the analogy of 'parasitical resistance' (Fisher, 2020) to illuminate how young people act agentially and knowingly within contexts where they are welcome as young people but also made secondary because of their age, and sometimes their gender. Drawing on their involvement with the Greater Manchester Combined Youth Authority, Dunne and Duggan are rightfully careful not to argue that young people were 'parasites' at the adult table but, rather, acknowledge that there was a game afoot in which long-standing tools of radical resistance have limited effect and the young people needed to find a way to navigate an unequal system in order to be heard at all.

Moving towards less institutionalised forms of participation that fit with young people's circumstances and experiences, Hasaan Amin, Vanessa Attipoe, Hassan Dantata, Daniel Rimes, Barry Percy-Smith and Nigel Patrick Thomas's Chapter 3 reflects on how leading a change-making project provided more meaningful opportunities for young people to seek out representation and democracy. Drawing upon [Henn et al.'s \(2018\)](#) contention that young people are gravitating towards less institutionalised forms of participation that fit with their lifestyles, they describe how the Manchester Young Researchers led a participatory action research project about homelessness in the city, informed by what the young people were seeing around them and personal experiences. Despite limitations in time and resources, Amin et al. make a compelling case for ensuring that there are spaces for young people to co-produce their own ideas for change, contrasting the ambivalences and discomforts of formal participation described by Dunne and Duggan in the previous chapter.

The section ends with Andersson's complementary exploration of the Gothenburg Youth Council (Chapter 4). Using findings from the ethnographic case study of the setting, Andersson argues that the Youth Council in Gothenburg offered opportunities for young people to be sociable and to work together on commonly held goals, supported by a professional, pedagogic 'manager', as is usual practice in Swedish youth work. Thus, he reminds the reader of the importance of moving beyond the dichotomy of adult-led versus youth-led approaches to a middle ground where collaboration can take place. The learning from Section 1 emphasises how formal modes of participation are still the choice of many young people, but that it is important to make space for youth-led co-produced democratic participation.

Section 2, 'Self-organising, Protest and Activist Movements', explores the explicitly political and counter-political activism of young people in Manchester and Frankfurt. A central theme considered by the authors in this section is the use of protest and campaigning for social justice and equality, and the ways in which young people self-organise and come together to create new ways of 'doing politics' and of living political and social alternatives. The chapters illustrate how young people push against a political hegemony and work towards a new politics, by drawing on older, established non-hegemonic ideologies, and by creating a space where young people can be free to be together and to exist differently.

In Chapter 5, Gráinne McMahon sets out the ethnographic case study of Manchester's young feminists. She identifies how the young feminists were committed to dismantling the patriarchal social order, whilst their participation and activism focused on women's issues and rights and the need for a 'politics of difference' ([Young, 1990](#)) that addressed their group needs, differences, and specificities. The analysis explores how the young women's feminist journeys were characterised by their motivations for 'be(com)ing feminist' as 'personal-political' and 'political-personal' journeys ([Hanisch, 1970](#)), that came about because of the young women's individual experiences of gendered disadvantage and a recognition that the needs of women, and women's equality, would not be achieved in current political and democratic arrangements that favour a focus on the 'common good'.