Book Review

Ross, Alistair. 2019. *Finding Political Identities: Young People in a Changing Europe*.

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This book reports a qualitative investigation into how young people of secondary school age in Europe construct their identities, which is a complex and contested area, and explores how they become aware of their actual or potential European citizenship.

The author is Alistair Ross, Emeritus Professor of Education at London Metropolitan University and holder of a Jean Monnet Chair *ad personam* in European Citizenship Education, highly experienced in studies about citizenship education in a European Dimension. He founded and directed the Institute for Policy Studies in Education at London Metropolitan as well, and used to run a large European Academic Network: Children's Identity and Citizenship in Education (CiCe) from 1998 to 2008. Previously he published, among other things, a study of young people's construction of identities in 15 European countries, involving 150 focus groups (976 young people), *Understanding the Constructions of Identities by Young New Europeans: Kaleidoscopic Selves* (Routledge, 2014), and *Finding Political Identities: Young people in a changing Europe* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

Ross uses deliberative discussions as an opportunity to allow young people to express their own constructions and terms in conversation with him, and with each other. He collected and examined 324 group discussions in small discussion groups between 2011 and 2016, creating contingent narratives of local, national and European identities, and analysed how young people shape their identities in relation to different political places, ranging from the local to the global, and to interacting with multiple social agents (family, friends, educators, and the media), involving 2,000 young people (13 to 20 year olds) across 29 European states (some of them non-EU members: Iceland, Macedonia, Norway, Switzerland, Turkey). The countries are grouped into regions that have some similarities in terms of history and culture: the Nordic/ Scandinavian countries, the Baltic states, the Visegrad Group, the Balkan area, the south-eastern states, the southern states, the central-western states, the mitteleuropa states.

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He did not make a statistically representative sample, he was not concerned with legal nationality or status, but addressed young people whose home was in the country at the moment of the group discussions, and looked at the diversity of views. The youngsters involved were male and female in a balanced proportion, had origins from many countries across the continent, and the world, from small villages and towns as well as cities and metropolises. The school population has become much more diverse and mixed than in previous times; 27,9 per cent of young people in the study were at least of partial descent from a country other than the one in which they were living (foreign birth, one or more foreign parents or grandparents).

Ross explored not only *what* identities and affiliations students expressed, but *how* and *why* they constructed them, and the contribution of the schools and of the media to the formation of their political selves, considering many questions: citizenship, democracy, respect for rules, participation, European integration, racism, nationalisms, Eurosceptic sentiments, and xenophobic movements.

The book is structured in seven chapters preceded by a foreword, with the introduction to the research and the conceptual frameworks for the study, including the list of the colleagues who introduced the researcher in the different countries (p. x-xiii) and the cooperating associations (CiCe, NECE, British Council).

The first chapter explores concepts such as the nation, citizenship, country, state, Europe, basing the arguments on the current scientific literature. The second and third chapters examine the contingencies that arise from the events around the participants, what political issues concern young Europeans, their knowledge of firstly their local society, and secondly of recent events (p. 153), focusing on young people's narratives about political rights, freedoms, diversity, migration, refugees and nationalism.

Meaning is socially constructed. The fourth chapter analyses the influence of different agents in the construction of these narratives: family, friends, school staff, and the social media. The channels of socio-political action have changed, and digital pathways appear to have gained weight at the expense of conventional forms. Looking at how media were used, most young people were critically reflexive about them, showing a level of sophistication that does not always seem to be recognized (p. 154). The fifth and sixth chapters examine how these young people have been creating their political identities in relation to the places they inhabit, political locations of country (size of the village, city), province, region, and continent.

Any identity has multiple edges and irresolvable tensions, to form an identity kaleidoscope, using the metaphor of the author. All young Europeans interviewed generally showed concern about public issues and were actively involved in collecting and interpreting political information; this result is not in line with the conceptions of political socialization, that consider the young person as a passive receiver of judgments, predispositions, and political habits.

One of the pervading characteristics of most conversations was the perception of a generational divide (chapter 6), as these young people see themselves as generationally different, sometimes from their parents, nearly always from their grandparents. One of the most sharply defining lines of difference that was put forward was most young people have an

acceptance of ethnic diversity and pluralism. Most adolescents stated that they abhor racism in principle, nevertheless, stereotypes were very common.

Chapter 7 examines the context of nested communities, from the local to the global, considering two perspectives; the internal perspective asks if the inhabitants broadly construct themselves as a distinctive group or not, within Europe, while the external perspective asks how other Europeans, in other countries or regions, characterize the region (p. 183).

The last chapter offers as a synthesis, a final reflection that tries to explain the contingency of the included narratives; it focusses on a need to identify alternative social and development paradigms. Though the reluctance of over-generalizing, for many of the participating adolescents, a common European substrate seems diffuse beyond geographical territory. Exploring to what extent do the schools and the media contribute to the formation of their political selves; an overwhelming majority of youth recognize that their teachers are reluctant to talk about political issues in the classroom.

This book is a comprehensive, informative and thought-provoking contribution to the field of Identity and European citizenship. The author manages to capture the insight of basic findings on political identities, the greater or lesser degree of involvement in the resolution of those affairs, drawing together a multitude of aspects from the answers to the questions in the field of education.

Ross succeeds in laying out a concept that characterizes the needs of young people for an education that fosters their personality development and examines also the need for a critical and in-depth analysis.

This book also discusses the basic principles of a critical, reflexive understanding of education; it is written in an accessible style, although necessarily very detailed, and would be of interest both to practitioners and policy-makers active in the field, it is especially of interest to scholars across Education, Sociology, Politics and European Studies, especially those with a focus on Citizenship, Identity Studies, and Youth Studies.