



**Ross, A. (2018). *Finding political identities: Young people in a changing Europe*. London: Palgrave MacMillan.**

Pp. 366

ISBN: 978-3-319-90875-5

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What political issues concern young Europeans? Are they interested in politics? Do they identify with Europe? Are they more racist than other generations? To what extent do the schools and the media contribute to the formation of their political selves? Alistair Ross answers these and many other questions about how young Europeans construct their political identities at a moment when the European integration project is facing the rise of essential nationalisms, Eurosceptic sentiments, and xenophobic movements. This timely book is the result of a research project supported by the European Commission, which granted its author an *ad personam* Jean Monnet Chair of Education for citizenship in Europe. As a promoter of the Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe Academic Network, this Emeritus Professor of the London Metropolitan University has a long career in the subject (see, for example, Ross, 2012, 2013, 2015).

Very critical of the results obtained by the quantitative studies on the topic, Ross collected and examined 324 group discussions with 2,000 young people from 29 European



states (some of them non-EU members) between 2011 and 2016. Through these discussions, Ross analyzed how 13- to 20-year-olds shape their identities in relation to different political places, ranging from the local to the global, and to interactions with multiple social agents (family, friends, educators, and the media). The book delves into each of these areas and shows how they are constantly and contingently adapted and combined – using the metaphor of the author – to form an identity kaleidoscope. Any identity has multiple edges and irresolvable tensions that Ross manages to capture insightfully.

For many of the participating adolescents, a common European substrate (beyond geographical territory) seems diffuse until comparisons with autocratic regimes or neoliberal states are introduced. Many highlight the linguistic-cultural features of their countries when talking about their national identities, although their civic-political identities emerge when they think about their (possible) integration into the European Union. Most adolescents stated that they abhor racism in principle, but they do not always consider minorities such as the Roma population within the European project. As Hogan (2009) wrote, “There is much more fluidity and complexity in our geographical identifications than one might imagine” (p. 4). Descriptions of the multiple and complex identities of these young Europeans would interest anyone who wishes to understand how youth attribute meanings to the political world and how they attempt build their political role therein. It encourages the reader to ask tough questions: do socioeconomic status and gender influence the formation of these identities, or what will be the imprint of Brexit on the political subjectivities of British youth or the effect of Erdogan’s authoritarian drift on Turkish teenagers?

The structure of the book brings us closer to the varied combinations of the author’s

identity kaleidoscope through seven chapters. First is an introduction to the research and the conceptual frameworks for the study. The second and third focus on young people’s narratives about rights and freedoms, diversity, migration, and nationalism. The fourth analyzes the influence of different agents in the construction of these narratives: family, friends, school staff, and the media. The fifth and sixth examine how these young people have been creating their political identities in relation to the places they inhabit, generally in political-administrative terms. The last chapter offers, as a synthesis, a final reflection that tries to explain the contingency of the included narratives.

It is noteworthy that, in a genuine exercise of understanding the “other,” Ross demonstrates a laudable respect for the adolescents whom he interviewed. Contemporary reflections on young people and politics must start by referring to their growing disaffection and apathy. The image of the young person disinterested in everything that has to do with politics has not only gained strength among public opinion, but also in academic research (Benedicto, 2008, p. 13). More and more voices, however, have begun to question this assumption about the relationship that youth maintain with politics. This book is one of them – and an obligatory reference. Its analysis presents a polyphony of beliefs and values that largely belies the classical conceptions of political socialization; i.e., those that consider the young person as a passive receiver of judgments, predispositions, and political habits. Although wary of party politics and politicians, the young Europeans interviewed generally showed concern about public issues and were actively involved in collecting and interpreting political information.

However, Ross’s vision of these young people’s participation in public affairs is sometimes too optimistic. Certainly, their participation cannot be evaluated according to

the same terms as has been done up to now: the channels of sociopolitical action have changed, and digital pathways appear to have gained weight at the expense of conventional forms. Yet, it should not be forgotten that, although the Internet offers us tools for political mobilization, online participation often gives us an illusory sense of efficacy that discourages us from getting involved offline (Turkle, 2017, pp. 333-339). Moreover, with the personalization of information, the internet often becomes a bubble increasingly distant from the democratic ideals of respect, dialogue, and diversity (Han, 2014; Pariser, 2017; Turkle, 2017).

In any case, both the interest of these young people in collective affairs and their

greater or lesser degree of involvement in the resolution of those affairs seem to be the product of what Lopes, Benton, and Cleaver (2009) call the political socialization “by default.” One good example of this phenomenon is that an overwhelming majority of youth recognize that their teachers are reluctant to talk about political issues in the classroom, to the point that several infer that it is prohibited. Although this finding is not exclusive to this study (see Ho et al., 2017), it is another call for attention to the importance of rethinking citizenship education in schools; and yet another reason to read this book for those scholars concerned about the democratic future of Europe.

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## About the Reviewer

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