

EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION: POSTCOLONIAL PERSPECTIVES ON CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION DEBATES IN EUROPE

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This special issue discusses how under-representation, misrepresentation, dislocation, equity and equality challenges have been part of the reasonings and argumentations of critical postcolonial debates on citizenship education in contemporary Europe. It grows out of new, interdisciplinary and methodologically pluralist research and collaboration, made possible by financial support from the European Cooperation in Science and Technology (COST) Action 16211 *Reappraising Intellectual Debates on Civic Rights and Democracy in Europe* (RECAST), funded by the European Union (EU) Framework Programme Horizon 2020.

Between September 2017 and September 2021, the RECAST network – comprising scholars from various disciplines as well as social and political practitioners – aimed at enhancing the relevance of intellectual debates on civic rights and democracy in Europe, arguing that this

was compromised in terms of informing policy due to theorisation from largely unrelated spheres as opposed to responses produced by joint approaches in the humanities and the social sciences. The RECAST project sought to bridge the gap between the study of politics and policy action and to develop new insights about the links (theoretical, political and institutional) between civic rights and democracy in Europe.

This special issue presents some outcomes emerging from workshops organised by the RECAST Working Group *Debates* that focused on studying firstly the argumentative links connecting practices with concepts and arguments in debates on civic rights and democracy in Europe; and secondly the practices and procedures of historical, moral, political and legal debates on civic rights and democracy (COST Association, 2017, p 12). In this context, debates provide crucial research material for the analysis of the argumentative links between concepts and practices; not only do they constitute the arenas for public controversy but also a fundamental means for politics. Debate differs from ordinary dialogue in that it involves presentations in favour and against an issue in which both sides actively seek to enlist support for their views. Whenever there is debate on a topic, it necessarily shows the controversies embedded (Wiesner, Haapala & Palonen, 2017). Therefore, debates often provide crucial information on the political concepts and the practices related to the controversies. In the Working Group these were taken as the nexus of studying democracy and rights in Europe and as a source for policy recommendations.

The Working Group *Debates* explored a range of case studies on political agency in various European democracies, experiencing controversies, emergencies and some even facing serious political, social as well as economic issues triggered by technological developments,

irregular and economic migrants, population ageing, the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change. The research delved into how these issues, in some instances manifesting concurrently, directly or indirectly challenge the rule of law, equality and/or representation in Europe, which have only been aggravated in the recently applied state of emergency contexts due to the pandemic. Technology emerged as key in providing tools for communication, participation and knowledge production. However, even more so, the research findings underlined the dire need for citizenship education that fosters critical thinking and the ability to distinguish between reliable and untrustworthy information among the endless number of opinions and data available for consumption in the traditional and online media. This informed the choice to publish the work emerging from the Working Group together with intersections between the ongoing research and the postcolonial perspective. For example, similarly to the RECAST project and its Working Group *Debates*, the postcolonial perspective has been proposed as a response to challenges to democracy, among them growing authoritarianism and violence against the marginalised in the global North.

The term ‘epistemicide’ coined by de Sousa Santos (2014), referring to violence against indigenous knowledge by colonial powers, has inspired many postcolonial scholars (e.g. Darder, 2015; Bennett, 2007) seeking to appraise or reappraise such knowledge, to counter (or resist) more dominant views that gained dominance as an outcome of colonialism. Moreover, within EU studies, a scholarly discussion has emerged on ‘normative power Europe’ (Manners, 2002), in part advancing the idea that the EU exhibits imperialistic tendencies, especially in its *mission civilisatrice* towards the ‘neighbourhood’ in assuming that its norms and practices should be imposed on its ‘periphery’ (Del Sarto, 2016, p 218; Zielonka, 2013).

The Working Group *Debates* created opportunities to counter undemocratic, neo-colonial narratives in Europe. In this sense, opposition of postcolonial scholarship to epistemicide - evident in its appraisal of knowledge under the colonial threat of destruction or distortion (esp. de Sousa Santos, 2014) - resonates with the platform that the *Debates* afforded to explore. The results of the research conducted within the framework of the Working Group can thus offer counter-epistemicide attempts of citizenship education for political agency in European democracies.

This special issue brings together scholarly contributions resulting from participation and discussions in the Working Group *Debates* regarding citizenship education. The theme of education was deemed crucial to intellectual debates on civic rights and democracy. Policymaking in national and supranational contexts, tools and the honing of skills and competencies, and who has access to these and on what grounds, featured among the salient matters at stake and emerged as crucial factors for democratic political agency. Successful participation in political debates in European democracies demands knowledge and skills that are conducive to the effective and sustainable use of communication tools and, more importantly, an understanding of the content of what is (or is not) being read, watched, and listened to, particularly online.

In recent years, citizenship education has been increasingly advocated as a proactive or formative and sustainable response to the mounting threats to fundamental values such as peace, equality and human rights faced in Europe, and several countries are accordingly making changes to their policies in this area. In this context, the central concern addressed in the five-paper collection of this special issue is: What debates do

European democracies need to grapple with to foster sustainable citizenship education imbued with political agency? To answer this crucial question, the special issue has undertaken the endeavour equipped with RECAST's interdisciplinary network's expertise and methodological pluralism, ranging from case studies and empirical analyses to contributions on democratic and social theory.

The first article *Media Literacy Challenges to Debates on Civic Rights* by Lilia Raycheva examines three Bulgarian debates on civic rights reflecting on the 2021 report of the Media Literacy Index: the ongoing social protests, the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2021 parliamentary (pre-election) campaign. She emphasises that the media are supposedly among the main forces of deliberative democracy developments ensuring fair and reasonable debate among citizens. In her article, the concept of media literacy addresses the potential of contemporary societies to resist the negative effects of such phenomena as diminishing public trust and severely polarised politics. Traditional and modern internet-based media affect citizens' daily lives, politics and society. In the social, economic and technological environment, there is a significant and growing need for professional training of journalists and media literacy education of citizens on the importance of the media - not only for critically reflecting, but also for shaping public opinion. This is because the risks to media trust are huge in today's post-truth age, the proliferation of fake news and the opportunity for almost anyone to become a "reporter" who creates and disseminates information via social media and messaging apps. The fine line between the right to freedom of expression and the dissemination of unreliable, spurious information also creates additional difficulties in identifying and screening relevant information. The article examines the political (P), economic (E), social (S) and technological (T) practices (in short, the PEST analysis) of

the literacy trends and disruptions in the Bulgarian media and communication ecosystem. This critical approach to the efficient engagement of all stakeholders participating in this process (legislators, regulators, media services and mobile communications providers, as well as content producers, professionals, researchers, educators and users) for upgrading the improving competences, tools and skills in media, information and digital literacy may lead to effective results. In contemporary knowledge-based societies, the information challenges posed to the media ecosystem by fake news, post-truth, echo chambers, filter bubbles, and the like, should be met responsibly, to support democratic debates on civic rights.

Maria Brown's and Vincent Marmarà's paper on *'Media-ted' electoral campaigns: Europeanisation and postcolonial dynamics of voters' use of media platforms in Malta* takes us to the EU Member State and formerly colonised island of Malta. It presents the findings of a quantitative empirical study of media platforms used by Maltese voters in the runup to the 2017 general election and voters' engagement with national politics in 2021, a few months before a yet-to-be-announced general election. Demographic factors affecting choice of medium to source news and political attitudes included gender, age cohort and education. The empirical findings are, perhaps, unsurprising: older and less educated cohorts sourced their news primarily from television, while the use of online sources (especially of Facebook) increased between the 2017 and 2019 elections, especially among younger and more educated voters. Yet these findings substantiate the authors' amplification of the remit of postcolonial communications and media scholarship to understand how tradition "tribalised socio-cultural milieu". The paper argues for continued investment in media literacy as a tool for discerning and potentially overcoming radicalising political agendas. Consequently, this study validates

media's (potential) agency in citizenship education, whilst identifying shortcomings. Since voters are adults, the study also informs on barriers that citizenship education in postcolonial settings needs targeting as part of the broader framework of adult education and lifelong learning agendas.

A conceptual analysis bringing the role of political parties in citizenship education under scrutiny features in Tomás Pacheco-Bethencourt's paper *The Debate Over Civic Education: Its Place in Populist Rhetoric*. The article focuses especially on populist rhetoric in the Spanish context with the research question: what value does citizenship education hold in populist rhetoric? Spain's main populist parties, *Vox* and *Unidas Podemos* (United We Can), right-wing and left-wing respectively, serve as case studies to illustrate how citizenship education has been operationalised for the purpose of constructing 'the people'. The theoretical discussion draws on the work of Ernesto Laclau (2005, 1996) to substantiate the fabrication of political identities through discursive means and the framing of empty signifiers in populist discourse. Pacheco-Bethencourt argues that the focus of populist rhetoric is on the fabrication of citizenship through discourse which gives meaning to the conceptual core of civic education. The paper offers a critical deconstruction of possible meanings and interpretations of 'populism'. Findings of the case studies on Spain's right-wing and left-wing main populist parties, *Vox* and *Unidas Podemos* respectively, corroborate how the two parties harnessed civic education to fuel conflict and polarisation.

Gilda Hoxha's article *Possibilities of higher education for a productive civil and social engagement: The experience of Albania* discusses a case study that analyses civil and social engagement (CSE) and possibilities for education based on the Albanian historical experiences and current

challenges to the democratisation process. The relationships between the concepts analysed are approached from two perspectives: the status quo of the institutionalised political system and the involvement of education in building productive civil democratic engagement. The article is organised in two main parts: first, the theoretical approach focusing on key issues related to civil and social education is laid out, and second, the outcomes of the civil and social engagement in the democratisation process are analysed. Three models of education are identified: the absolute education model, the sorting model, and the cumulative model. The article argues that based on the Albanian socio-political setup in recent decades, the country has stabilised its political representation and decision-making process, but nevertheless Albanian society still faces a chaotic development towards democratisation, including in education. Consequently, civic and social engagement concepts and collective behaviour are perceived as key factors to raise awareness in citizens about public policies, decision-making and governance. Additionally, while Albanian policy-makers widely recognise that education serves as an engine for economic growth through the accumulation of *human* capital, education is also strongly associated with boosting levels of *social* capital.

Finally, the analysis of this special issue queries the more globalised digital and environmental facets of contemporary citizenship in Anna Björk's and Claire Shaw's paper *Extensions of citizenship? Exploring digital, global and environmental citizenship education*. The authors note how extending citizenship's parameters "from its state-centric origins towards contemporary global governance structures and other points of reference" yields new demarcations and challenges to the legal dimension of citizenship. They examine how new forms of citizenship are presented on a national and transnational scale. The

curriculum and policy approaches of three European nations, three transnational organisations and one academic institution are analysed to assess how citizenship is recontextualised in the face of globalisation, climate change and digitalisation. Björk's and Shaw's reappraisal of citizenship on these terms evokes postcolonial possibilities that include novel tools for participation and a sense of belonging to a wider, global community. These unfold in sites of struggles for equal opportunity and equity in the politics of citizenship resulting from inequalities, particularly of access and impact.

Significantly, the contributions in this special issue engage with the project RECAST's commitment in the Memorandum of Understanding of the COST Association to tackle "the responses of European democracies to the growing conflicting claims" about civic rights. It thus aims at "widening" the interpretative outlook and enhancing "transnational understanding" to facilitate "constructive conditions to engage scholars as well as non-academic stakeholders" to better inform political reform (COST Association, 2017, p 3). It is hoped that, far from signalling the end of RECAST, the postcolonial thrust of the discussions examined in this special issue will further broaden the RECAST and the Working Group's research agenda in its established networks and result in further and novel interdisciplinary and methodologically pluralist reappraisals and collaborations concerning civic rights and democracy in a globalised Europe.

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