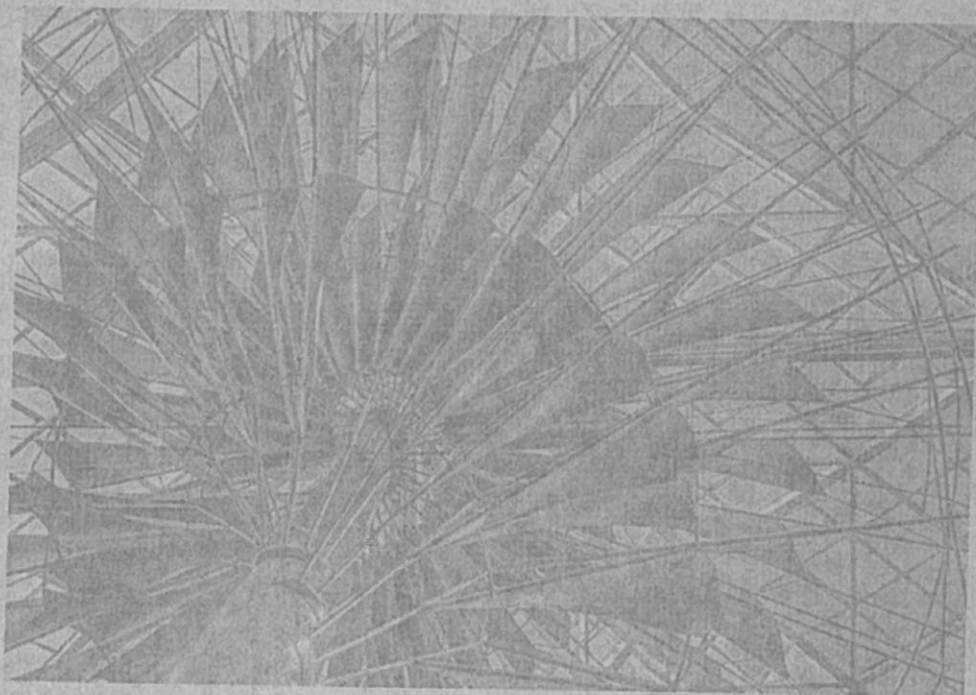


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**Politics, Citizenship, Diversity and Inclusion**

**ASSOCIAZIONE "PER SCUOLA DEMOCRATICA"**

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## The Missing Element of 'Organic Relation' in Current Definitions of Active citizenship. Evidence from the Field

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**Keywords:** *Active citizenship, Organic connection, Europe, Vocational education, Dwelling*

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### Introduction

The problem of active citizenship has mainly been approached through the perspective of participation. According to the most recent definitions, active citizenship «involves participation in the market [...] participation in other social spheres [...] and politics itself» (Dean, 1999:189); «is about having the right, the means, the space and the opportunity and where necessary the support to participate in and influence decisions and engage in actions and activities so as to contribute to building a better society» (Council of Europe, 2003) and «incorporates a wide spread of participatory activities containing political action, participatory democracy and civil society and community support» (Mascherini et al., 2009:10). In a more recent definition, «citizenship competence [is defined as] the ability to act as responsible citizens and to fully participate in civic and social life, based on understanding of social, economic, legal and political concepts and structures, as well as global developments and sustainability» (European Commission; 2018: 22-23).

This paper takes a different stance and argues that the organic relation between the individual and its environment that has characterized citizenship in previous times is a fundamental precondition for the development of active citizenship in the EU context. In order to support this argument, the paper drew on political philosophy and urban theory to locate the types and forms of organicity that have been deemed fundamental in previous micro-scale political and territorial entities. In order to explore this argument empirically, this study explored how 180 students from three EU countries perceive Europe through a word association activity.

Research results revealed that not only students do not perceive to have an organic relationship with Europe but also that their perception of Europe is characterized by absence and detachment. In the succeeding sections, the paper outlines the theoretical framework that underpins the leading argument, presents the research methodology of the study and, on the basis of the research results, concludes that the limitation of active citizenship to the element of participation hides important risks in the direction of marginalization and undermines the effectiveness of the relevant EU policy.

## 2. The organic character of citizenship

This section details the types and forms of organicity between the individual and its environment, that have been deemed fundamental in the birth, development and flourishing of previous political and urban planning entities, such as *poleis*, cities and towns. Under the concept of organic relation or organicity, in this paper we refer to the concept of Heidegger's (1971) «dwelling as positioning of oneself 'within a system of metabolic exchanges» (Besse, 2013: 130).

The importance of organicity in relationships between the citizen and the polis was first expressed by Aristotle in *Politics*. According to Aristotle, polis has three main characteristics: (1) It has priority over the family, and the individual, similar to the whole, has priority over the parts [πρότερον δὲ τῆ φύσει πόλις ἢ οἰκία καὶ ἕκαστος ἡμῶν ἐστίν. Τὸ γὰρ ὅλον πρότερον ἀναγκαῖον εἶναι τοῦ μέρους] (*Politics*, 1253a: 20-24); (2) it is the space in which justice takes place [ἡ δὲ δικαιοσύνη πολιτικόν· ἡ γὰρ δίκη πολιτικῆς κοινωνίας τάξις ἐστίν, ἡ δὲ δικαιοσύνη τοῦ δικαίου κρίσις] (*Politics*, 1253a: 35-39); and (3) its aim is not only to assure the living (ζῆν) but also the living well (οὔσα δὲ τοῦ εὖ ζῆν) (*Politics*, 1252b: 30-34). For Aristotle, a citizen is not only one who lives in a city in the territorial sense but mostly an individual who actively participates in the administration of justice and the holding of public office (*Politics*, 1.1274b: 32 - 1279b: 10).

This organic relationship, which is *ex ante* political in Aristotle, is reiterated in Aristotle's statement that if the spirit of citizens' participation in the affairs of the polis is the same after they have come together as it was before they left their separate spheres, this community would not be a polis (*Politics*, 1280b).

In the later urban theory, Lynch (1960:63) by associating the «legibility» and «imageability» of urban environment with people's actual function and emotional well-being (*ibid*: 2-3), resumed in fact the organic relation between the citizens and the meaning processes related to the city. Alexander (1979: 101) also underlined the organicity between cities and citizens by emphasizing that a man's «harmony depends entirely on his harmony with his surroundings». In putting forward an ecological argument, Ingold (2000: 20) equally underscored «the importance of the dynamic synergy between the organism and the environment for the creation of mutual meaning making, growth and development».

Furthermore, the past years have seen increasingly frequent references to the code of cities, which encapsulates the previous elements of 'legibility', 'harmony' and 'synergy'. Montgomery (2013: 288), compared to Lynch (1976) was considerably more explicit in unravelling the power of the code, asserting that «the power that shapes [the] city is in the code» (Montgomery, 2013:288) and that this code «is invisible but it is in charge» (*ibid*: 290). Similarly, Anderson (2015:489) defined cities as 'states of mind'. Corroborating this argument on the basis of lived experience of different socio-economic groups, Bourdin (2014: 7) argued that the inhabitants of cities or of the periphery of cities go through experiences that extremely differ according to social situation, age, culture and life history, as well as according to their localization in the city and the localization of the city itself.

### 3. Research

Having set the theoretical basis of the argument, the study proceeds in this section by exploring how vocational education students from three EU countries perceive Europe, through a word association activity.

The sample consists of 180 14–19-year-old vocational education students, comprising 61 students in Italy, 51 students in France and 68 students in Greece. In Greece and Italy there are two schools per country, one in an urban and one in a rural area. In France, there are three schools on the periphery of Paris. Most students come from low socio-demographic environments, with less-educated parents in low-paid jobs, and in many cases one of the parents has recently become unemployed. During the word association activity, students were given the following assignment: *Associate up to six words with the word 'Europe'*.

In Table 1 below, it can be seen that in all three countries a) a significant number of students gave no response, b) followed by an almost equally significant number of students who only used one word to describe Europe, and c) that a poverty of expression manifests as in none of the countries did students use more than four words and the vast majority used zero to one word.

**TABLE. 1.** *Number of words used by students per country to describe Europe*

Countries	Number of words given by number of students						Sum of students per country	
	0	1	2	3	4	5		6
Italy	21	21	10	5	3	-	-	61
France	22	15	9	1	4	-	-	51
Greece	30	24	8	5	1	-	-	68

In relation to students who gave no reply in the word association activity, because, as they declared, they have nothing to say about Europe, we need to mention that gender and type of specialization are not important. Moreover, the type of residential area could not be assessed in France, as the French schools were all in Paris. It is also no significant in Italy, as in the rural area we had 10 out of 37 students with no responses in comparison to 10 out of 24 in the urban area.

It needs to be mentioned, however, that both schools are situated in the north of Italy. In Greece, by contrast, the type of residential area is highly significant. Twenty-four out of 35 students from the urban area did not respond in this activity compared to six out of 33 students in the rural area.

In figures 1–3 below, the responses from the three population groups can be seen. Students' responses were collected, and word clouds were created for each population group with the MAXQDA 2018 software.

Given that the vast majority of students replied with up to three words, we established three as the minimum number of responses per word for inclusion in the word cloud. In the figures are presented the words in the national language as reported per population group and on the side is cited each word's translation in English and its level of frequency in the activity's word corpus per country.

The size of each word in the cloud indicates the frequency of its mention.

**FIGURE. 1.** *Word association with 'Europe'– Italy.*



FIGURE. 2. Word association with 'Europe'– France.



**Rien:** 22 hits  
(No response)

**Group:** 5 hits (Group)

**Bien:** 5 hits (Good)

FIGURE. 3. Word association with 'Europe'– Greece.



**Τίποτα:** 30 hits  
(No response)

**Ένωση:** 5 hits  
(Union)

**Όμορφη:** 5 hits  
(Beautiful)

**Ταξίδια:** 4 hits  
(Travelling)

**Διάλυση:** 4 hits  
(Disintegration)

**Χάλια:** 4 hits (Awful)

**Ψεύτικη:** 3 hits (Fake)

### 3. The missing organic relation

Research results revealed a) an alarmingly high number of students who used zero or an extremely limited number of words to describe Europe, b) that perceptions of Europe among Italian and Greek students are divided between positive and negative characteristics, whereas for French students seem rather neutral and c) that students' responses across the three countries are very similar. In relation to these results, the following observations need to be made.

First, the fact that the large majority of students used zero words to describe Europe, if combined with the almost equal number of students who used only one word for that purpose, is highly alarming. Students' response 'I have nothing to say about Europe' and the use of the word 'union' or 'group' as the most frequent word in all three countries express an absence of perceived relation as the words 'union' and 'group' lack a sense of opinion, judgement or emotional response. This element is important if we also consider Sokolowski's (2017:12–16) position that nouns have a referential function which moves away from a definite context, with the latter becoming even more irrelevant as the speaker is taken away.

Secondly, it can be observed that the first signs of evaluation appear in the second most-frequent word, which is good ('bien') for the French students, oscillating between divided ('divisa') and beautiful ('bella') for the Italian students and becoming more diversified when it comes to Greek students. In the Greek sample, it can be observed that there is a greater variety of words in the established three-word frequency level and also that there are only two positive evaluations such as travelling ('ταξίδια') and beautiful ('όμορφη') and three negative



evaluations such as fake ('ψεύτικη'), awful ('χάλια') and disintegration ('διάλυση').

The important element about both remarks is that they provide insights on how students perceive Europe, and this perception is fundamental because perception reveals the 'relations between the organism and the field' (Simondon, 2013:3; translation from the French text). As Simondon (2013: 322) puts it, 'both the organism and the field are active and the equilibrium between the two requires a constant adaptation of the organism to the field in order to avoid the «too soon' or the 'too late'». When this perception is the perception of non-relation, it can be realized that that the above equilibrium cannot be achieved. Moreover, if we consider that «man dwells in language» (Heidegger, 1971: 195) and that «I cannot dwell in a place I do not like» (Besse, 2013: 31). we realize that students' responses are very alarming not only in the direction of active citizenship but also in the direction of their flourishing if seen under «the unity of experience» of Heidegger's thinking building dwelling (Sennett, 2018: 218).

Finally, the fact that the students of the sample, who come from vulnerable socio-economic environments, perceive no real relationship between themselves and Europe recalls recent data affirming that 'it is the level of income that influences the variations [of active citizenship] across the countries' (Eurostat, 2017). This recalling apart from being highly alarming brings to the fore Sennett's (2018: 204) argument that the Heideggerian 'dwelling' is not a given but «a skill the potentiality of which lies in most people» and therefore needs certain conditions of development for it to be activated. On the other hand, the substitution of the organic relation by the element of participation in the current definitions of active citizenship hides two further risks. First, it recalls that «many exclusions are made without the knowledge that they are being made» (Butler, 2015: 4) as we fail «to conceptualize the situation correctly» (Harvey, 2009: 22) and to capture the complexity of dimensions composing active citizenship. Secondly, in the policy making level, by ignoring students' perceived relation with Europe when planning the development of active citizenship agenda means insufficient information about «the relevant planning environment» (Hall, 1980: 5) that undermines the effectiveness of the relevant EU policies as «the forces in a situation are real forces, [and] there is no getting around them» (Alexander, 1979: 34).

#### **4. Limitations and suggestions for further research**

This research presents three important limitations: first, given that this is a qualitative research, the sample is quite limited. This research methodology should be conducted at a larger scale in the same countries and in the same type of population to see if there are variations and if so, at what extent and towards which direction. Second, it would be interesting to extend the research in other countries and for the same type of population in order to further explore the working hypothesis. Third, it would be highly interesting, to reproduce the same methodology in the general education, in order to explore if there are variations within the students of the same country.

#### **Conclusion**

Through a word association activity, this study uncovered that vocational education students in three EU countries experience difficulties in describing Europe in an engaging manner. The research interpreted these results on the

basis of the organic relation between the individual and its environment, unraveled the risks behind the conception of active citizenship mainly in terms of participation and concluded with the contention that it is time to look at forms of disadvantage and social exclusion that derive from our ways to conceptualize active citizenship.

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