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Title: Ethnographic approach to participation in EU policy : developing polyspatial agency

Year: 2022

Version: Published version

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Please cite the original version:

Mäkinen, K. (2022). Ethnographic approach to participation in EU policy : developing polyspatial agency. *Political Research Exchange*, 4(1), Article 2134809.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/2474736x.2022.2134809>

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To cite this article: Katja Mäkinen (2022) Ethnographic approach to participation in EU policy: developing polyspatial agency, Political Research Exchange, 4:1, 2134809, DOI: 10.1080/2474736X.2022.2134809

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/2474736X.2022.2134809>



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Published online: 28 Oct 2022.



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Ethnographic approach to participation in EU policy: developing polyspatial agency

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ABSTRACT

This article uses an ethnographic approach to study citizens' participation in the context of participatory practices organized in the framework of cultural policy of the European Union. It focuses on one EU policy action, European Heritage Label (EHL) and one cultural heritage site that has received this label. The research data was collected through participant observation and interviews with young people who participated in the activities organized on and by the site. This article asks: what meanings the participants give to participation. By analysing the participants' experiences of the site and their conceptions of participation, I develop the notion of 'polyspatial agency'. The ethnography of participation introduced in the article enables recognizing diverse conceptions of participation and agencies as well as the possibilities and problems related to participation in the micro-level realities of the sites, thus deepening and diversifying the understanding of participation, EU policies and participatory governance.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 22 December 2021
Accepted 06 October 2022

KEYWORDS

Ethnography of participation; citizenship; European Union; polyspatial agency; cultural heritage

Introduction

In and around political science, ethnography has been used for investigating social movements, deliberative democracy and institutions and organizations, such as the state, the parliament and the European Union (Bevir and Rhodes 2010; Crewe 2016; Hamm 2015; Shore 2000; Talpin 2012). This article develops ethnographic research on citizens' participation in the context of participatory practices organized in the framework of cultural policy of the European Union.

While participation has been particularly since the European Commission's (2001) White Paper on European Governance strongly emphasized in EU documents across different levels and sectors, including cultural policy, this article sheds light on implementing EU actions and experiencing their participatory practices 'from below'. It focuses on one EU cultural policy action, European Heritage Label (EHL) and one cultural heritage site that received this label in 2013, the Museum Alcide de Gasperi (hereinafter MAG) in Pieve Tesino, Italy. Based on participant observation and interviews with young people who participated in the activities organized by MAG, the aim is to investigate what meanings the participants give to participation.

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Ethnographic investigation of the practical level shifts the attention to the everyday politics and the participants themselves and their meaning-making. Zooming in on one specific case and its micro-level realities enables recognizing plurality of conceptions of participation and agencies as well as the possibilities and problems related to participation. Furthermore, ethnographic research focusing on participation at a cultural heritage site can generate new understanding on participation.

The EHL was launched as an intergovernmental scheme in 2006 and turned into an official EU action in 2011. Since 2013, the European Commission (EC) has awarded 60 sites with the EHL. The action has two general aims: 'strengthening European citizens' sense of belonging to the Union' and 'strengthening intercultural dialogue' (EP&C 2011, 3). The labelled sites are expected to 'promote and highlight their European dimension' (EC 2016, 2). EU policy documents are explicit that the EHL is not about the aesthetics or conservation of cultural heritage but about constructing an idea of European heritage (EC 2010, 2) on which a 'European identity' can be built. As such, the EHL, like many other EU actions, is also used as an instrument in the EU's identity politics and 'soft' integration politics (Lähdesmäki et al. 2021).

The research on MAG is part of a broader research project (EUROHERIT, 2015–2020), in which I was affiliated as researcher in a research team of five (on the project, see Lähdesmäki et al. 2020, introduction and appendix). We conducted fieldwork at 11 EHL sites in 10 countries. The criteria for our case selection was their location in different parts of Europe and their representation of various historical periods and topics. MAG exemplifies a site that has 'played a significant role in [...] the building of the Union' (EP&C 2011, 4), which is one of the criteria for the label. Among our fieldwork cases, other similar sites are European District of Strasbourg and Robert Schuman's House in France. While we did not conduct such intensive participant observation of one particular activity at all sites, the analysis of the other sites helps to contextualize the MAG case and scrutinize the interconnection of cultural heritage and participation.

Our project showed how ethnographic research can inspire conceptual innovation. Sharing our fieldwork experiences and reflecting them in the light of previous research resulted in developing the concept of polyspace to describe and interpret experiences at cultural heritage sites. Here I apply the concept for analysing conceptions of participation in the selected interview data. Furthermore, drawing from the ethnographic fieldwork and interviews at MAG, I will introduce the notion of 'polyspatial agency' to conceptualize participation in contexts that cross spatial or temporal borders. 'Polyspatial agency' helps to scrutinize the role of heritage experiences for participation. For this conceptual development, the combination of zooming in one case and reflecting the findings of the entire project was crucial.

In what follows, I will first construct the theoretical framework that understands participation simultaneously as a dimension of citizenship and as polyspatial agency. Then I will introduce the research material and my methodological approach, the 'ethnography of participation'. In the following section, I analyse the conceptions of participation in the data. This article ends with concluding remarks on ethnographic approach on participation and the notion of polyspatial agency and its development through heritage experiences.

Theoretical framework

Participation is here investigated within a theoretical framework consisting of two interwoven parts: understanding participation as a dimension of citizenship and as polyspatial

agency. The first part draws on previous research on citizenship and participatory governance whereas the latter part is based on a conceptual innovation inspired by our own ethnographic research. They both share a perception of participation as political activity.

Approaching participation from the theoretical framework consisting of citizenship and participatory governance can contest conceptions of participation as collaboration or co-creation and as an automatically positive solution to most varied problems as well as the related notion of 'active citizen' which often refers to supporting the goals of administration rather than citizen-driven activity. This approach can explain the paradoxes of participation better than for example research on democracy innovations or bottom-up activity. To provide deep and detailed knowledge on participation, the discussions on citizenship and participatory governance are here combined with the notion of polyspatial agency, which draws attention to personal experiences that are simultaneously site-specific and crossing borders.

Participation as a dimension of citizenship

Participation has been defined and categorized in numerous ways (e.g. Van Deth, Montero, and Westholm 2007; Rosanvallon 2006, 26; Verba and Nie 1972). In representative democratic systems, voting is an important form of political participation. Participation in terms of grassroots engagement and civic activism can relate to myriad practices from consumption choices to workplace democracy. Participation in civil society associations can be seen as Tocquevillean 'schools of democracy' which provide a forum to train political agency and influence (see Putnam 1994, 6–7, 121, 130). Common to different forms of participation is that they convey citizens' claims into the public sphere and place new issues on the agenda.

Participation is here understood as a dimension of citizenship together with other core dimensions of citizenship, such as access, rights and duties (see also Magnette 2005; Turnhout 2010; Rosanvallon 2006; Wiener 1997). Citizenship consists of 'vertical' relations between the individual and institutions (of the state, municipality, EU, etc.) and 'horizontal' relations between citizens (Dobson 2006; Neveu 2013). As a complex, contingent, contested and changing concept, citizenship involves multidirectional power relations, inclusions and exclusions (Wiesner et al. 2018). Participation is embedded in this network of power relations, capable of simultaneously manifesting citizenship both as agency for using power and as a status through which citizens can be governed.

Participation has the potential to enable citizenship as a political agency rather than just a status or identification with a community. Indeed, participation as a dimension of citizenship does not refer to citizenship only as a legal status defining membership in a polity. Instead, also non-citizens can perform 'acts of citizenship' when they claim rights or recognition (Isin and Nielsen 2008). Participation is at the core of this performative notion of citizenship, which is about 'being political' (Isin 2002, 2017).

Articulating participation as a dimension of citizenship emphasizes participation as political activity in an Arendtian (1993a[1961], 217–221, 1993b, 241, 1998, 181–184, 198) sense: as sharing words and deeds, as a public space constituted by the presence of many, in which the political becomes possible. This kind of activity includes political judgement and is characterized by starting anew (Arendt 1993a[1961], 1993b, 1998). As such, it involves using power and seeks to change the status quo.

In the last couple of decades, participation has become a popular concept. New arenas of participation have emerged and non-institutional forms of bottom-up participation are gaining popularity. Also top-down participatory practices have been increasingly generated within participatory governance (e.g. Lindgren and Persson 2011; Newman 2005; Papadopoulos and Warin 2007) at different levels of administration from local and national to European and global. They aim to engage citizens in auditions, projects, partnerships or other activities organized by the administration, sometimes characterized by governmentality (Dean 1999). While participation has been perceived as one of the cornerstones of democracy (e.g. Dahl 2000), participation in terms of participatory governance has an ambiguous relationship to democracy (Mäkinen 2018; Nousiainen and Mäkinen 2015). On one hand, participatory practices may involve citizens in decision-making and offer opportunities for more direct democracy, but on the other, participation in participatory practices can be seen, for instance, as informing, consultation, placation, delegated power and citizen control depending on what and whose interests participation serves and what kind of influences it has (Arnstein 1969).

Both the 'participatory turn' (Saurugger 2010) and the increased scholarly interest in citizenship in the 'renaissance of citizenship' (Mäkinen 2014, 109) since the late 1980s and early 1990s (Kymlicka and Norman 1994) indicate a conceptual change regarding participation and citizenship. The interpretations of both are in transition and the concepts are used in all possible contexts with increasingly diversified meanings. Due to this transition, participation and citizenship need to be investigated not only in public institutions of states and municipalities but also in multiple sites and more local contexts. Ethnographic research is thus needed to complement knowledge based on theories and law (e.g. Neveu 2005). Ethnographic studies show that the realities of participation and citizenship are messy and people understand and practice them in various ways (e.g. Isin and Nielsen 2008; Lillie and Wagner 2018). For example, ethnography can reveal the limits of participation (Polletta 2014) and investigate how categories such as citizenship are constituted anew (Ouroussoff and Toren 2005, 209; Wagenaar 2012, 94).

Conceptual innovation based on ethnographic research: polyspace and polyspatial agency

The concept of polyspace is useful for scrutinizing the very personal meanings and non-institutional forms and sites of participation. It highlights how experiences of cultural heritage always engage with multiple layers of time, space and meanings. The concept refers to a cluster of four intertwined aspects in a heritage experience: (1) suddenness and surprise, (2) bizarreness, (3) social agency and interaction and (4) affect, emotion and empathy. Polyspace is both a theoretical concept and a method that can bring clarity to the affective, embodied, multisensory and cognitive experiences that produce a sense of hybrid time and space and intertwine with social interaction and agencies. As such, it diversifies knowledge production by producing deep knowledge on experiences (see more Turunen et al. 2020).

The concept draws on the spatial turn in human sciences, according to which complex spatial relations construct and determine the reality (e.g. Lefebvre 1991; Massey 1991, 2005; 2007; Harvey 1996; Crouch 2015; Thrift 1996). This relational approach to space is useful in investigating hybridized experience of time and space but does not capture

the mixing of various spatial, temporal and social layers. Therefore, we also started to examine our own fieldwork experiences more carefully. Here we aligned with the affective turn in scholarship, which emphasizes the role of the body and affective and polysensory experiences in creating knowledge (e.g. Crang and Tolia-Kelly 2010; Sather-Wagstaff 2017; Waterton 2014). Polyspace brings together these two turns.

The concept of polyspace proved helpful for reflecting my own fieldwork experiences in MAG but it also seemed capable of unveiling how the interviewees connected cultural heritage to the idea of participation that crosses spatial and temporal boundaries. In the empirical section of this article, I utilize the concept to interpret the meanings of participation and the links between participation and cultural heritage made by the interviewees. Based on that, I introduce a new theoretical concept: polyspatial agency.

Polyspatial agency particularly relies on the social agency and interaction aspect of polyspace. The intermingling and interaction of different temporal and spatial layers help the experienter to feel connection and negotiate with people and contexts in the present, past and future. Similarly to citizenship, understood in an Arendtian way as public and political agency, polyspatial agency draws the attention to the interpersonal activity. Even though cultural heritage experience can be very personal, it has the potential of opening space for dialogue between various people, groups and communities and for critical thinking, action and change (Kisić 2016). It can create multi-vocal communication between various actors, contributing to solidarity, cohesion and a sense of a shared world (Delanty 2017, 178).

Polyspatial agency also includes other elements of polyspace, especially the affective. Cultural heritage can evoke affective experiences and intensive engagement and 'dialogue' across temporal and spatial borders (Witcomb 2015). As John Dewey (1929, 1920) has pointed out, an intense personal experience is a pre-condition for problematization needed for politicization and action.

Ethnographic research always contains an element of surprise (Malkki 2007) and the concept of polyspace provides a tool for knowledge production drawing on unexpected elements. The experience of suddenness and surprise indicates a change and the existence of alternatives – both characteristic to political activity. Surprising heritage experiences can thus help us imagine diverse realities and divergent alternative futures (Harrison 2020).

Finally, bizarreness refers to the simultaneous presence of multiple temporal and spatial layers in cultural heritage through a confusing – perhaps momentary – experience, which breaks with normality. As such, the experience of bizarreness involved in polyspace helps to scrutinize the acts of citizenship which bring a break to the ordinary (Isin and Nielsen 2008). The experience of bizarreness enables to see how different layers of time, space and meaning may conflict with each other. It thus helps to recognize contradictions, contestations and dissonance, always inherent in cultural heritage (e.g. Kisić 2016), which also characterize political action (Arendt 1998; Mouffe 2005). Furthermore, such bizarreness can create a distance and thereby enable critical reflection, which can result in the politicization of new questions. Like the performative notion of citizenship discussed above (Isin 2002), the concept of polyspatial agency emphasizes agency and participation without underlining the agents' formal status of citizenship.

Hence, ethnographic research can inspire new conceptualization in various ways and various phases of the research process. Polyspace was produced in the process of sharing

our individual impressions and wondering our ‘peculiar’ experiences at the cultural heritage sites. At first, these fully unexpected experiences seemed small and insignificant, but by bringing them together and conceptualizing them through ‘polyspace’ they started to make sense and deepen our understanding of how cultural heritage is experienced. Here, the researchers as individuals and as a team acted as vehicles of conceptualization through their experiences and discussions.

While we coined the concept of polyspace very soon after the fieldworks, the concept of polyspatial agency has been developed in the phase of analysing fieldwork material. If the concept of polyspace emerged when sharing at first seemingly insignificant experiences that only later began to make sense, the concept of polyspatial agency was prompted by interviewees’ discussions that I immediately considered relevant. In the interviews made at MAG, the participants repeatedly expressed very intensive experiences they had in the museum that exceeded the current place and time. Moreover, they strongly emphasized participation and active agency. Without my own ethnographic experiences at MAG and our previous conceptualization of polyspace, I would not have understood equally well the participants’ reasoning about these two intertwined topics. The concept of polyspatial agency helps to examine them together.

Ethnography of participation: data and methods

Ethnographic research seeks to understand the discursive layers of meaning. It is grounded on the phenomenological idea that lived experiences play a central role in meaning-making and hence also the types of research material and the ways of collecting it must reflect it (Yanow 2007b). This kind of interpretive ethnography can be perceived and used as an interpretation of politics which takes into account that meanings and their references are always contingent, contradictory and constructed (Nousiainen and Mäkinen 2015). This focus on making, interpreting, communicating, sharing and contesting meanings is central to interpretive approach to political science (Bevir and Rhodes 2015; Yanow 1996, 2007b). However, just as interpretive research of politics is not always ethnographic, ethnography is not always interpretive (Rhodes 2015).

Meanings can be ‘read’ through various ‘signs’, such as concepts, discourses, artefacts and practices. Interpretive research is not only interested in the meanings that these ‘signs’, or ‘texts’, carry or the intended meanings of their ‘authors’. Rather, it focuses on the meanings given by various ‘audiences’ and seeks to understand acts and actors from within their sense-making of the situation (Yanow 2007a, 409). Moreover, it acknowledges that meanings are constructed in social and political processes, which means that institutions and policies, for instance, must be investigated as cultural practices. As such, it shares several points of departure with various approaches prompted by the linguistic turn in social sciences.

The ‘anthropology of policy’, developed by Cris Shore and Susan Wright (1997; see also Shore et al. 2011), acknowledges that ‘[t]he scope of government and the techniques of governance have expanded notably into the ‘cultural sector’ and understands policy ‘as an instrument for forging large-scale social identities’ (Shore and Wright 1997, 27–28). As such, it is useful for scrutinizing the EHL and the EU cultural policy more broadly because they are instruments that explicitly aim to create a European identity and belonging through culture and heritage. This ethnographic approach to policy pays attention to

‘the political’ in policies and sees policies as political action. It can enable examining the political aspects of participatory practices and revealing tensions and breakages in seemingly unified policy discourses. In the context of the EU’s multilevel governance, this approach is valuable as it focuses on ‘how ideologies infiltrate the institutions and practices of everyday life’ (Shore and Wright 1997, 24). EU’s cultural policies and practices can be seen as a way of legitimating the authority of the EU and a channel through which new subjects of power are constituted (Shore and Wright 1997, 12, 24).

Policies are conveyed to citizens through various forms, such as policy documents, programmes, communication campaigns, symbols and practices deliberately designed for this purpose or through more unintentional channels. Dvora Yanow (1996, 160–179; Yanow 2000, 63–69) has investigated how the built environment is laden with meanings communicating about policy and how citizens interpret these meanings. I understand the EHL sites as physical places which are selected to ‘convey’ meanings that are seen important in the EU cultural and other policies: above all, the ‘Europeanness’ (Lähdesmäki et al. 2021) but also – and tightly connected to it – values, such as peace (Mäkinen 2019) as well as participation, the focus of this article. This article concentrates on the participants’ conceptions of participation, since users’ interpretations is a key third dimension of spatial analysis besides ‘intended authorial or designers’ meanings and the materials themselves’ (Yanow 2006, 353). Their interpretations are generated in interaction with the museum’s activities and the intended meanings of its practitioners. Ethnographic research enables exploring the entanglements and contradictions of the goals and interpretations of the EU, heritage sites and their visitors and participants – all embedded in the EU’s multilevel governance.

Leaning on these ethnographic and interpretive approaches to politics, the analysis is based on a fieldwork conducted in Museum Alcide de Gasperi (MAG) in December 2017. The museum was founded in 2007, and slightly later a foundation, Fondazione trentina Alcide de Gasperi, was established to run the museum. The museum is located in Pieve Tesino, a village of some 600 inhabitants. It is in the middle of mountains near the Austrian border, 60 km from Trento, the capital of the region. Many of the activities of the foundation take place in Trento where the office of the foundation is based. The museum is built in the house in which Alcide de Gasperi (1881–1954) lived his first couple of years. De Gasperi was one of the founding figures of European integration, acting as prime minister of Italy in 1945–1953 and president of the European Coal and Steel Community in 1954.

The foundation has adopted citizenship and citizenship education in its core topics, which makes citizens’ participation a central aspect of its activities. The museum and the activities of the foundation are mainly directed at young people, and the website of the foundation (as well as the interview with the museum director) gives concrete examples of these activities (Fondazione trentina Alcide de Gasperi n.d.a, n.d.b). I had chosen the date of my fieldwork so that I could observe two such projects organized for young people: #eighteen! and Visioni d’Europa.

The weekend meeting of the Visioni d’Europa project that I was observing took place in Centro Studi Alpino dell’Università della Tuscia, located very close to the museum, and #eighteen! project had a meeting on the following Monday in the office of the foundation de Gasperi in Trento. A visit to MAG was included in the programme in both projects. The participants of the Visioni d’Europa visited the museum as part of their weekend workshop while the #eighteen! participants had visited it earlier in the same autumn.

The weekend was the first part of the *Visioni d'Europa* project. The second part was the trip to Strasbourg to participate in the European Youth Event in the following summer. Later in the summer, the third part dealt with the experience of citizenship. The weekend included discussions and lectures given by various experts on topics that were expected to be addressed in the European Youth Event, such as digitalization, economic inequality, European integration, climate, and environment.

#eighteen! project, focusing on citizenship, had started in October with a weekend in Pieve Tesino. The weekend addressed public institutions at different levels from local and regional to national and European. During the autumn, the participants continued to deal with the topics of citizenship and the functioning of public institutions primarily by making videos to be shown for the local institutions and the students of local schools in December.

The participants of both projects were university and high school students from Italy. We did not ask their geographic background more specifically, but some of them told that they studied in Trento or that they were originally from the Trentino area while others said they were originally from somewhere else. They were participating voluntarily. Their perceptions expressed in the interviews reflect this background of being a somewhat selected group presumably with prior interest in the topics of the projects. The projects form an important context influencing how the participants discussed the topics of the interviews.

In the *Visioni d'Europa* project, I travelled with the group by bus from Trento to Pieve Tesino on Saturday morning and back on Sunday evening. I participated in most of the programme during the weekend and ate the meals with the group. I followed the first session with the warming-up exercises and participated in a guided tour in the museum. I had introduced myself and my research for the participants in the beginning of the weekend, following the ethical principle that the research participants have a right to know about research that concerns them.

The main data of this article consists of participant observation and interviews made with participants of the two projects. I conducted the interviews in English, while a local fieldwork assistant made interviews in Italian. We also made a couple of interviews together in Italian. The assistant was a native Italian living in Trento who had just completed his master's degree in law, found through the University of Trento.

Ten interviews were made with participants of *Visioni d'Europa*, one of them via email after the fieldwork because of lack of time. Almost all the participants volunteered for the interviews and even though we were two people making the interviews, we had difficulties in finding time for the interviews among the programme. On the following Monday, we made four interviews with the participants of #eighteen! project in the office of the foundation.

As a background material, I also utilize the interviews with the two museum guides, the museum director and the staff member responsible for the pedagogic work. In the interviews with both participants (coded V1–V16) and practitioners (coded P1–P4), I followed the order of pre-designed questions, but I made the interview situation 'conversational' (Yanow 2007a, 410) by proposing follow-up questions based on what the interviewees said and asking for examples and specifications. The topics of the interviews included cultural heritage, the notions of European heritage, European identity and feeling European as well as the exhibition, narrative and activities of MAG (for interview questions, see Lähdesmäki et al. 2020, appendix).

Additional research material collected during the fieldwork includes photos taken by the interviewed participants, photos taken by me, observations in the museum as well as informal discussions with the staff members of the foundation and the participants of the two projects. It also includes the recorded audio guide and photos taken from the images and texts on the tablet attached to the audio guide, both in English. This material is not analysed in this article, rather, its role is to give me ethnographic sensitivity for interpreting the interviews.

Utilizing ethnographic research and adopting the notion of polyspace enabled me to take seriously 'often marginalized forms of embodied affective, imaginative and creative knowledge' (Culhane 2017, 7). The museum and the two projects became a shared frame for the interview questions and responses – site of meaning-making – providing keys for the interpretation during and after the fieldwork. I interpret the interviewees' conceptions of participation against my own experiences of the projects and the museum visit; and against what I know about theirs, based on my observations, which is essential in ethnographic research (Yanow 2007a, 409). In Yanow's (2006, 352) words, my 'reflective sense making of [my] own experiences of being in others' world' was crucial. My experiences of attending the programme in the *Visioni d'Europa* project and spending time with the participants made a remarkable difference in gaining understanding of participation and participatory projects, compared to plain interview data. The in-situ interviews and the inter-corporeal experience (O'Neill 2018, 79–80) of the museum and other project activities provided me kinesthetic and multisensory knowledge that helped me interpret the interviews.

Polyspatial agency: participants' conceptions of participation

Most of the participants started to discuss participation unprompted, immediately at the beginning of the interviews, even without asking about it, and they continued to emphasize it throughout the interviews. The influence of the two projects focusing on the idea of citizenship is thus clear. The themes that the participants discussed in the interviews can be divided analytically into two interrelated categories. The first category consists of interlinked discussions on mobility, geopolitical scales, Europe and European integration as well as citizenship. The second category deals with affects, empathy and social relations. All these topics can be interpreted as elements of polyspatial agency.

Both categories include discussions on political participation as the participants strongly emphasized individual and collective action and their will to change the preconceived conceptions of Europe and the EU – sharing words and deeds and starting anew in the Arendtian vocabulary. Moreover, already the act of participating in the two projects dealing with citizenship, public institutions and topical debates can be perceived as political participation.

Mobility, scales, Europe, citizenship

The exhibition starts with a big train wagon. You can hear train sounds from sound monitors and see landscape photos behind the train windows. This way the exhibition refers to the multiple environments in which de Gasperi lived and worked as well as the roles that

the trains played in several phases of his life. The train can be interpreted as a symbol of the polyspatial agency of de Gasperi.

'The initial section where there is the train that represents the route of de Gasperi who was a citizen of Trentino, but at that time Austrian, and who used the train to go to Vienna, where he was a Member of Parliament and then there was a European Union flag as to invite to get on the train, to the route to be done together towards a single goal that was precisely the peace between the European nations and the protection of culture and identity.' (V13)

As exemplified by the quote, several participants recognized that Alcide de Gasperi grew up in Trentino – a border region and a cultural minority with its language and dialect, which belonged to the Austro-Hungarian empire and later to Italy. The exhibition highlighted that from the beginning, this multinational and multilingual environment formed a significant context for de Gasperi. According to the audio guide, the travels in trains between Trentino and Vienna as a student influenced in the development of his thinking and emerging political ideas. Later his positions as member of parliament in Vienna, member of parliament and prime minister in Rome as well as president of the European Coal and Steel Community took him across borders of regions and states. The museum represents de Gasperi's life as multiscale: he was active at both local, regional, national and European scale. This transnational and multiscale context together with the temporal context including the Fascism and the two world wars gave impetus for his efforts for advocating European integration.

The participant also mentions the big EU flag on the wall, interpreting it as an invitation 'to get on the train' to the joint journey towards peace and the protection of culture and identity in Europe. Several participants indeed experienced the museum as an invitation to continue de Gasperi's work.

While the train illustrates how mobility and border crossing, the core ideas of the current EU, were present in the life of de Gasperi, several interviewees discussed how transnational mobility in Europe was part of their feeling of being 'European'.

'we are the generation that continues to move. I began to travel, well, exchange trips, cultural or so, when I was still in elementary school. So for me it has always been normal to know that you can cross a border within the Union without incurring problems, visas and things like that. [...] it makes me feel truly European this thing of having a common territory on which you can wander, meet people, have exchanges, different languages' (V12)

This quote exemplifies how the participants described mobility as an everyday experience, facilitated by the EU. They expressed an interest in crossing state borders also in the future. The emphasis on mobility indicates a polyspatial mindset that finds it natural to act in several places simultaneously. The quote also makes a reference to interaction and social relations across territorial distance which are core elements in the notion of polyspace. Such discussions in the data imply the idea of 'an "imagined community of Europeans"' (Shore and Wright 1997, 27).

In this polyspatial sense, mobility was discussed also in the context of the centre-periphery dynamics referring to the influence of Alcide de Gasperi. Although growing up in a remote small place, his ideas and work travelled far and had a broad influence.

'it's something of our history, one would never say that something so important is born from a village of five hundred people, isolated on a mountain. So it is important to make it known

and to remember that in any place of the Union, in any place, something big can be born.’ (V12)

If transnational mobility was a natural experience for the young participants, the remote location of the museum was experienced somewhat bizarre. Also the museum staff underlined that the location offers visitors an embodied experience of being away from the busy cities – an experience that can blur the typical perceptions of the centre–periphery relations and provide new perspectives. The participants highlighted this contradiction but also the interplay between several geopolitical scales.

While emphasizing locality, many stressed participation in broader contexts, especially at the European level, thereby constructing a Euro-local scale of participation (Mäkinen 2021): ‘we need to work in a political field and we need to think about the problem with a hope in mind, vision, so we need to think about problem of Europe, not only for our state’ (V3). Participation for these participants means active involvement in constructing Europe and looking beyond nations, in particular (e.g. V13; V16).

‘we can learn of Casa de Gasperi the idea of participation. I think it’s very important for our generation and in particular for the European youth to do something to make a better Europe. [...] we think only for our own state or nation, but we need to think big, to think in a European vision.’ (V3)

This kind of polyspatial participation at the European level was seen crucial: ‘Europe starts from us, from the citizens, from the participation of citizens to Europe’ (V2). For the interviewees, ‘encouraging the citizens [...] to be more direct with the participation to the European Union’ (V1) was important.

Nevertheless, many participants felt that the European scale is absent in the spheres of their everyday lives, such as the school and the media (V16). This lack indeed motivated some of them to participate in the projects (V12). The interviews indicate that agency and participation need information and support (V14; V16). This kind of active seeking for information and insights on European matters – and spreading it themselves after the project, as one participant envisioned (V12) – can be interpreted as developing polyspatial agency.

The participants recognized that participation at the European level involves various power dynamics. One participant points out that ‘there is a democratic deficit [...] in the EU institutions’ and therefore does not feel herself ‘involved in the decision-making process, which affects everyone’ (V7). This demonstrates that real opportunities for taking part in EU decision-making would be important for citizens. She seeks a link to the EU level through the local level: ‘I still have to understand how, perhaps, at the local level I can vote (and) how then to get to that supranational level’. Usually the participants did not discuss much their concrete participation at any level – even though they were extremely interested in political participation and perceived citizenship important – but this interviewee mentions voting at the local level as a way to ‘rehearse’ participation at the supranational level. Another participant acknowledged that ‘Europe’ is ‘constructed’ ‘both from above and below’ and hoped that ‘the institutions themselves promoted an awareness of citizens’ (V9) regarding the questions on the EU integration. The importance of citizens’ active role within this power dynamics is indicated through his claim: ‘don’t let the process of Europeanization to be totally something that is imposed on you from above’ (V9).

As an example of polyspatial agency crossing both spatial and temporal boundaries, one interviewee combined the current time and place with a vision of acting in a broader framework: 'here, at the moment, in my place [...] I can do something for this, something bigger, above us' (V12). Another felt 'a responsibility to take this message from De Gasperi, from the house of De Gasperi [...] and conserve it with responsibility when I speak with other people in all of Europe and in all of the world' (V11). This activity is perceived as a bottom-up participation that seeks to involve more people in decision-making (V4).

The emerging polyspatial agency was further exemplified by the participants' discussions on the notion of change.

'he was a person that managed to ride the wave, despite the related difficulties, the stress of being an active part in a change, and he is an example of one who – in fact we can choose if we remain passive or active in a change – wanted to be active, so he is a model of reference, then it's up to us to follow him or not.' (V9)

The participant deliberates whether to be active or passive in change and to follow or not to follow the model given by de Gasperi. Another participant points out the future-oriented activity of de Gasperi: he 'believed in something that did not exist yet' (V3). Some participants wanted to change Europe through citizens' participation (V8; V13), feeling that the EU is in crisis or has lost 'the values that de Gasperi wanted to promote hoping them to continue' (V8.). Indeed, the participants emphasized citizens' agency as a critical counter-weight to the EU's top-down activity.

The notion of citizenship was explicitly discussed by the participants (e.g. V3; V14) even though the interview disposition did not include questions about it. This can be seen as a reflection of the two projects, in which citizenship was a core topic. Adopting the Arendtian (1993a [1961], 1993b) conception of political activity, the interviewees emphasized critical thinking and political judgement as necessary elements of participation and citizenship, mentioning voting as one of the forms of citizens' participation. A participant wanted 'to be able at the time of voting, which is a crucial moment in choosing a future for a citizen, to make conscious choices with the head and not with the stomach' (V13). He explained how cultural heritage provides 'critical knowledge' that helps 'to develop an autonomous and thinking mind without being influenced by those who try to have our attention but perhaps do so only for a political or propagandistic purpose' (V13).

Also other participants brought forth that cultural heritage was crucial for providing knowledge about the past needed for building the future (e.g. V2). Indeed, cultural heritage can be seen as knowledge production that can make visible silenced or hidden knowledge and suppressed histories and thereby enables a change in our views (Crang and Tolia-Kelly 2010; Ng 2017; Niklasson 2019; Waterton 2014). As such, engagement with cultural heritage helps us to imagine 'radically distinct futures' (Harrison 2020, 6).

Affects, empathy and social relations

The exhibition ends in the birth room of Alcide de Gasperi. Visitors cannot enter it but the room is watched from above, from a kind of a balcony. The only light emerges from a moving photo installation showing children from past times reflected on the wall and floor next to an old cradle. A lullaby in the dialect of De Gasperi's home region is

played from the sound monitors. Both participants and the staff members describe the room as an impressive space.

'The thing that touched me the most was the final part where there was Alcide's cradle. Because we walked through all of Alcide's life and then we went back to the cradle, how to say now we need a new start, the foundations have been laid, something has been done and now is the right time to redo something important. And this encouraged me or anyway made me to want to do things and improve. And not to say like many people, oh well, things are going wrong and oh well, so we stop. The desire to do and to improve things.' (V12)

The experiences in the birth room demonstrate clearly how heritage sites offer opportunities to feel that this space refers to other spaces perhaps far from here and this moment refers to other moments perhaps in entirely different period. The concept of polyspace seeks to capture these confusing experiences of feeling simultaneously distance and connection to other people, in the past and present. Such experiences make us think of others' solutions and ways of acting in the past and consider their adaptation in the present situation. For example, the quote above identifies the interplay of the past, the present and the future: 'something has been done and now is the right time to redo something important'. For this participant, the cradle symbolizes a new start that encourages her 'to do and to improve things'.

MAG was a strong affective experience for the participants. Several interviewees expressed enthusiastic feelings about the stories displayed at the museum and passion for influencing in the European politics. The museum and the life story of de Gasperi raised effects such as inspiration, admiration, motivation and courage. These effects were experienced as a push to develop their agency: 'I want to put into practice his history' (V3). De Gasperi was seen as 'an important figure by whom we should all be inspired, also about how to develop our ideas' despite obstacles (V8). A staff member perceived the birth room as a symbol of future, new generations and the task of all the generations to take responsibility of continuing de Gasperi's work (P4). Polyspatial agency can thus be cross-generational.

Many participants emphasized both physical, geographic vicinity and mental, ideological vicinity to the figure of Alcide de Gasperi simultaneously (e.g. V4; V13; V14; V16). As one of them described: 'when I was in the museum I completely felt myself in the trip of life of De Gasperi, so I was like De Gasperi' (V11). During his immersive experience, this participant felt that it was about his own and his parents' history.

However, some of the participants discussed various forms of distance between themselves and the museum narrative. For example, one of them said that cognitively it was easy to relate to the narrative based on her knowledge of and passion for history but nevertheless 'I think that no one can feel it really close. No one nowadays lived it, in the first person. [...] I feel it close but not too much. At the same time, I would like to like to feel it closer but I can't because [...] I was born now' (V1). In addition to different time, also geographic distance was mentioned: 'I'm not so close to De Gasperi's history, for the reason of different age and in particular I'm from the south of Italy, so I see the different culture of the land. Because Trentino is very north of Italy' (V3). Despite temporal and spatial distance, also this participant like several others felt a personal connection to the legacy of de Gasperi at the level of intangible heritage: 'But I think my idea and

my value is a value of De Gasperi and I think we inherit not his history in first person but his ideas and his values. So we live through him in this way' (V3). Also another participant sensed a close relation to de Gasperi through her previous knowledge but also through values: 'I think because of my values, because of my visions I'm feeling really connected with him, because I agree with his visions' (V2).

The participants emphasized how cultural heritage can offer common ground for making and maintaining social relations across differences, which is linked to the agency aspect of polyspace. According to them, cultural heritage enables sharing, encountering, exchange and building bridges (V1; V3; V14). The participants explained how interaction related to cultural heritage can make visible both differences and the common elements, such as 'human rights, respect, solidarity and lots of values' (V1). Alongside with the differences, 'we have to share the same thing that makes us good citizens and to coexist with each other' (ibid.). The discussion on connections demonstrates how cultural heritage can provide 'encounters with moments in other people's worlds' (Pink and Morgan 2013, 356), as exemplified below.

'I felt it touched me very, this visit, he touched me very much in the sense that I love these kind of things. I love putting myself in the reality someone else lived, so seeing with my own eyes something so personal as the objects and the fields we did today, this is involving me very much.' (V2)

Such experiences of connection and empathy have transformative potential and can strengthen agency and promote active participation. Collaboration across geographical distance and cultural differences is another related element relevant for polyspatial agency underlined in the interviews (V1; V3; V12), as discussed earlier.

My own polyspatial experience demonstrates how both affects and interaction play a role. It was constructed through the atmosphere and multisensory affective experience but also through my interaction with the participants in the interviews I had made with them.

I experienced that several times were merging in that tiny spot. I thought about the young students I had interviewed. Their enthusiastic words echoed in my ears: they deeply felt the need to continue and protect the European dream De Gasperi had pursued and that had taken its starting point here, in this house, where he was born. I felt like I was concretely standing simultaneously both in the past and future. (Field report, December 2017)

I sensed the past through the space of the birth room as well as the exhibition narrative on the biography of de Gasperi, whereas the young students represented the future to me. In the interviews, the participants connected de Gasperi's action seamlessly with the present day and expressed being themselves a link in the chain from the past to the future. My hybrid time experience was thus generated through having listened to the participants.

My experience also contained several spatial dimensions. Even though I was standing in a little village in the middle of the mountains, I did not feel being in the periphery. This experience was influenced by the way in which the story of de Gasperi was told in the museum and how I had heard the participants and the museum director underlining the transnational and multiscalar nature of de Gasperi's life and activities, as mentioned earlier.

Conclusion

The ethnography of participation, introduced in this article, enabled zooming in the grass-root realities and deepening and diversifying the understanding of participation, EU policies and multilevel participatory governance. The analysis indicates that the participatory practices organized by MAG may contribute to creating 'a 'European' public' (Shore and Wright 1997, 27) but these practices – or the EU policies 'above' them – cannot entirely determine how this emerging public acts, debates and participates.

Ethnographic fieldwork allowed production of knowledge 'in, about and through atmospheres' (Sumartojo and Pink 2019, 11). Hence, in the research focusing on conceptions sparked by a place, it was necessary for the researcher herself to have a personal experience of the place in question. The ethnographic research, together with the concept of polyspace that was used to interpret the ethnographic data, enabled drawing attention to the role of sensory experiences, affects and imagination in meaning-making (see Culhane 2017, 11). The concept of polyspace helped to recognize how multiple temporal and spatial layers intersect in heritage experience.

Participation can stem from affective, embodied, multisensory and cognitive experiences sparked by cultural heritage. The ethnography of participation indicated how the experiences and atmospheres encountered by the participants in MAG acted as a strong inspiration for civic participation. Participants frequently emphasized the role of cultural heritage in developing their present and forthcoming agency. The interviews demonstrate that cultural heritage allowed participants to negotiate with temporal layers (see Witcomb 2015). Experiencing the cultural heritage in MAG enabled the participants to feel connection, empathy and solidarity across spatial and temporal borders. The ethnographic research showed how especially the train and the birthroom in MAG intensified the polyspatial experience.

The ethnography of participation indicated how intense heritage experiences constituted participants' polyspatial agency. The notion of polyspatial agency, developed in this article, enriches the research on agency by showing that agency is not individual, isolated activity. As such, it can be used to scrutinize the horizontal dimension of citizenship and its interpersonal relations (Dobson 2006, 3; Neveu 2013, 205). The concept enables discussing several sites and forms of participation and citizenship at once. It, therefore, refers to participation that is not tied to official status or spatial frames of citizenship but rather manifests 'acts of citizenship' (Isin and Nielsen 2008; Isin 2002, 2017).

Since the acts of citizenship can be creative and bring a break to the ordinary (Isin and Nielsen 2008), the notion of polyspace can shed light to them by revealing sudden, surprising and bizarre experiences. Surprising experiences can be described with the notion of serendipity: unexpected experiences guided by a chance that can launch processes of reflection and open new perspectives and new kind of understanding. For example, in MAG, the participants were surprised that an influential European leader grew up in such a peripheral place. This surprise together with their own embodied experience of the location enabled them to alter preconceived ideas of centre–periphery dynamics and realize that participation crosses and brings together geopolitical scales. Polyspatial experiences were also constituted by the simultaneous distance and closeness felt by the participants when encountering the cultural heritage at MAG. Despite and through this contradiction and bizarreness, the participants felt inspired by the legacy of de

Gasperi, which indicates how the dissonance intrinsic in cultural heritage can promote citizens' participation (Harrison 2013; Kisić 2018).

In further research, the concept of polyspace can be used for scrutinizing heritage experiences outside memory organizations in everyday life. It would be important to investigate also other types of using and experiencing cultural heritage that may not be as empowering and that may create polarization and boundaries instead of bridging. Furthermore, since all spaces can be understood as multitemporal and multispatial, it would be crucial to investigate polyspatial agency in other contexts beyond cultural heritage.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the European Research Council (ERC) under the EU's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme (Grant number 636177, EUROHERIT) and the Academy of Finland (Grant number 330602, HERIDI).

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