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Liminal participation: young people's practices in the public sphere between exclusion, claims of belonging, and democratic innovation

This is the final peer-reviewed author's accepted manuscript (postprint) of the following publication:

Published Version:
Ilaria Pitti, A.W. (2023). Liminal participation: young people's practices in the public sphere between exclusion, claims of belonging, and democratic innovation. YOUTH & SOCIETY, 55(1), 143-162 [10.1177/0044118X211040848].

Availability:
This version is available at: https://hdl.handle.net/11585/817629 since: 2024-05-21

Published:
DOI: http://doi.org/10.1177/0044118X211040848

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(Article begins on next page)

05 July 2024

This is the final peer-reviewed accepted manuscript of:

Pitti, I., Mengilli, Y., & Walther, A. (2023). Liminal Participation: Young People's Practices in the Public Sphere Between Exclusion, Claims of Belonging, and Democratic Innovation. *Youth & Society*, *55*(1), 143-162.

The final published version is available online at: https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118X211040848

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Liminal participation: young people's practices in the public sphere between exclusion, claims of belonging, and democratic innovation

Abstract

Existing understandings of youth participation often imply clear distinctions from non-participation and thus boundaries between "recognized" and "non-recognized" practices of engagement. This article aims at questioning these boundaries. It analyses young people's practices in the public sphere that are characterized by both recognition as participation and misrecognition or stigmatization as deviant and it is suggested to conceptualize such practices as "liminal participation." The concept of liminality has been developed to describe transitory situations "in-between"— between defined and recognized status positions – and seems helpful for better understanding the blurring boundaries of youth participation. Drawing on qualitative case studies conducted within a European research project, the analysis focuses on how young people whose practices evolve at the margins of the respective societies position themselves with regard to the challenges of liminality and on the potential of this for democratic innovation and change.

Keywords: youth participation; liminality; democratic innovation; recognition; ethnography.

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1. Introduction

In the past decades, concerns about whether young people identify with and are prepared for active citizenship in democratic society have grown (Forbig, 2005). In Europe, such worries seem to have grown parallel to an increase of institutional attention to youth participation: since the early 2000, the European Union has progressively addressed the issue of youth participation by funding programs aimed at training young people for active citizenship and at enhancing their influence in decisions that affect their lives (Sloam, 2013). As a consequence, public interest for youth engagement has undoubtedly increased but mainly in the form of an institutionalized discourse against which young people’s actual practices are assessed (***; Pickard and Bessant, 2018). The emerging dominant narrative tends to recognize specific youth practices as “participation” (e.g., engaging in political parties, volunteering) but not others (e.g., protesting or youth cultural activities). While at EU level, this narrative is reflected by a lack of support for young people’s non-institutionalized claims (Sloam, 2013), its adoption by national and local governments has led to a prioritization of adult-led participatory programs and to an increasing stigmatization and criminalization of non-institutionalized youth practices (Farthing, 2010). Within academia, this discourse has reproduced a divide between studies measuring youth participation along narrow, institutionalized definitions and studies which reveal the implicit civic and political meaningfulness of youth cultural practices in public spaces, but which have not found access into the debate on youth participation (Harris et al., 2010; Ekman and Amnå, 2012).

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Against this scenario, this article argues that youth participation is contingent upon actors (e.g., adults, institutions) who have power to provide or deny recognition to young people's practices in public spaces as participation and that existing dominant distinctions between participation and non-participation legitimize an unequal system of recognition of what counts as participation. To avoid reproducing existing dominant discourses on youth participation, the article assumes that all practices in public spaces are *potentially* participatory and that the participatory nature of certain practices can only be assessed through a dialogic process aimed at evaluating if the involved actors had an idea of the public while engaging in them. As we will argue, such conceptual openness implies risks and contingencies.

The article looks at young people's practices that are commonly labelled as deviant in institutional discourses: squatting public buildings, football hooliganism, and graffiti. It analyses in-depth case studies conducted in the project ***, a European study focused on formal, non-formal, and informal possibilities of participation for young people in eight European cities. Aiming at reconstructing the meaning that young people attribute to participation the project analyzed the different styles and spaces in which young people are active and the conditions under which their practices are recognized as "participation" by institutions or not. For this article, three cases have been selected that combine recognized (e.g., volunteering, organizing cultural events, artworks) and unrecognized practices (e.g., squatting, rioting, graffiti) and therefore are situated 'in-between' participation and non-participation.

The first case considers 'Lucha', a self-managed social center (*centro sociale*) created by a group of 20 young leftist activists in a squatted abandoned barrack in Bologna (Italy). In the years of its activity (2012 - 2017), the social center involved more than 100 young people (18-25) and different self-managed projects including a shelter for homeless people and refugees, language courses for migrants, a helpdesk for unemployed people, a pizzeria, a microbrewery, and a bike-repair shop. The second case is 'Freccia', a football fan center

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developed by a group of 30 young ultras[1] (16-25) in an abandoned bowling club also in Bologna (Italy). In the center the young ultras organized leisure, social, and cultural activities while seeking to share the ultras culture with the surrounding community. The third case study focuses on the 'Hoodboys'; a graffiti crew in the city of Frankfurt (Germany). The crew consisted of an informal group of 10 young men (18-24) sharing an interest in graffiti. The group engaged both in legal graffiti as a kind of business and illegal tagging and graffiti in public spaces.

The cases are from two cities framed by different institutional contexts as regards welfare and youth policies and they represent different types of practice: one can be classified as non-conventional political participation, the others as youth cultural practice. In analyzing these cases, the article shows how young people develop their forms of participation beyond the boundaries of what – according to adult and institutionalized definitions – counts as participation; mixing recognized and non-recognized practices of engagement. We suggest conceptualizing such practices that question the apparently clear distinction between participation and non-participation as "liminal participation" and we shed light on the challenges that these forms of participation imply.

The paper starts with a brief overview of how youth studies so far have addressed the relation between recognized and non-recognized youth participation. It then discusses the concept of liminality and the implications of applying it to youth participation. A presentation of the research methodology is followed by a discussion of empirical findings focusing on how liminal practices of young people emerge and on how the young people deal with the challenges of liminal participation. The paper concludes with some reflections on liminal participation as a nexus of youth participation, recognition, and democracy.

[1] The term "ultras" refers to sports fans who, in addition to supporting their team, participate extensively in the match experience with choreographed cheers. Ultras groups are widely associated with violence and vandalism.

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2. Boundaries and distinctions of participation in youth studies

Youth studies have always looked at young people's practices in the public sphere assuming that youth participation plays a pivotal role in the evolution of societies. Over time, this interest has led scholars to elaborate different typologies to make sense of the myriad of practices through which young people express their interest in society. At the end of the 1970s, for example, Barnes and Kaase (1979) introduced the classic distinction between "conventional" and "unconventional" practices to distinguish between established forms of institutional participation and innovative and more fluid forms of political interest enacted by young people such as petitions, boycotting, or squatting. During the 1980s, baffled by the young generations' withdrawal from public politics, scholars adopted the (now mainstream) distinction between "political", "social" and "civic" participation (Pattie and Seyd, 2003; Forbing, 2005). The first category comprises both conventional practices (like voting, petitioning, and unionizing) and non-conventional ones (like manifesting or petitioning). The second category includes membership in organizations and volunteering in non-political associations. The third category refers to issue-based engagement like in environmental or cultural initiatives. Recently, the concepts of "latent" forms of political participation (Ekman and Amnå, 2012) and "engaged citizenship" (Dalton, 2008) have been proposed to recognize young people's expressions of interest in society developing beyond elections through, for example, life-style practices and anti-political forms of engagement (Farthing, 2010). Finally, scholars have distinguished between "institutionalized" and "everyday" forms of participation to make sense of youth claims of participation enacted through ordinary practices in daily environments, such as their homes or schools, (Vromen and Collins, 2010; Harris et al., 2010).

All these typologies have been developed as an attempt to give visibility to emerging practices of participation amongst youth. They contribute to overcoming distinctions of participation and non-participation that tend to neglect, hide, and exclude a broad range of young people's activities, that devalue them as 'incomplete' requiring more education and training and that assume that young people will adjust, with age, to the "right" ways of participating in society (Hall et al., 1999). Instead, they allow to differentiate

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between adult-led, institutionalized, and lawful practices of participation, which are formally recognized as relevant and democratic, and provisional, incidental, marginal ones, some of which are not only denied any democratic potential but also stigmatized and criminalized. However, as all typologies, these approaches introduce new distinctions and thereby risk excluding particular expressions of participation.

Findings of the project *** (***, 2020) show that – based on these classical conceptualizations – experts and institutional authorities tend to recognize young people's practices in public spaces as participation only if they a) comply with existing rules and norms and b) are held relevant for a wider community and the common good. This definition of participation excludes practices that may be relevant for the community, but do not conform to existing rules (like squatting an abandoned building to create a shelter for migrants) and practices that do conform with existing rules but are relevant only for the people involved (like using public spaces for skateboarding) (Fig. 1).

[Figure 1 – *Conditions for recognizing young people's practices*]

Rather than a question of "contents" (e.g., topics of youth participation) or "qualities" (e.g., effective capacity to produce change on issues that matter for the community), the recognition of young people's practices as participation depends on power relationships according to certain normative models of the "right" way to participate (Määttä and Aaltonen, 2016).

To avoid the reification of only institutionally recognised forms, as well as the hierarchization of different youth practices in less and more valuable forms of participation, this article starts from conceiving all forms of being active in public spaces as *potentially* participatory. We are aware that that this openness implies the

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risk of losing conceptual clarity. At the same time, we argue, that existing conceptualizations tend to reflect normative and institutionalized interpretations of participation (connected to habitus of the highly educated middle classes) with the effect of delegitimizing other expressions and claims of belonging and participation. Instead, we suggest that empirical analysis should aim at looking at different activities with an unbiased view to identify participatory potentials and claims also where these have not yet been acknowledged. This can only occur by engaging in a dialogue with the involved actors to find out if and what awareness of being part of the public sphere their activities involve (Harris et al., 2010; Vromen and Collins, 2010).

Leaning on Butler (2015), this approach implies extending the concept of the public sphere beyond institutionalized spaces structured by a normative order which grants individuals recognition as political actors only if their performances/practices are in line with the standard set by dominant discourses. Conceiving the public space as any "spaces of appearance" (Butler, 2015), this approach allows to consider the undefined, innovative, and always changing nature of youth participation and to explore under which circumstances a given public sphere activity is recognized or not as participation by adults and their institutions.

In line with other studies, the article argues that boundaries between conventional/political/institutional and unconventional/civic/everyday practices are not so sharp. Amongst others, Quintelier (2008) argues that participation in unconventional political activities is often combined with engagement through more conventional actions, Eliasoph (2013) shows how the boundaries between the civic and the political often disappear in volunteering, and Kelly et al. (2019) question the relevance of the distinction between everyday life and the political sphere when applied to new forms of entrepreneurship that emerge among precarious youth. Finally, also the [project title] project has revealed the blurred and fluid boundaries between young people's activities of coping with everyday life and political participation (***, 2020;).

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When closely observed, young people’s practices rarely reveal themselves as belonging to only one category. Instead, they develop combining recognized and non-recognized forms of engagement and questioning the apparently clear boundary between participation and non-participation. In this perspective, addressing the phenomenon of “in-betweenness” with regard to young people’s forms of engagement in the public sphere is relevant to acknowledge the complexity of young people’s ways to understand and practice citizenship.

3. Liminality – or: practices ‘in-between’

A concept that describes situations of in-betweenness is “liminality”. This concept has been developed in the context of anthropological studies of rites of passage in processes of initiation and describes the ambiguity of transitory situations between recognized status positions. In van Gennep’s (1909) and Turner’s (1969) perspectives, rites of passage are understood as an ensemble of practices through which initiands become full members of a social context by crossing a *limen*: the threshold marking the passage of a boundary. Such transition processes comprise three stages: a stage characterized by rites of separation from the old status position, a liminal stage where the individual’s status is undefined and fluid, and a stage distinguished by rites of reincorporation into the new status position.

Liminality, hence, refers to a condition of “in-betweenness.” Contrary to the concept of marginality, which describes the relationship between a given center and periphery, liminality shifts attention to the movements between two (or more) clearly defined points of reference. In this perspective, liminality describes realities developing between distinct social worlds to which they are, at the same time, related and somewhat marginal. This interpretation of the concept of “liminality” is useful to describe the marginalized practices this article focuses that, entailing both recognized (e.g., volunteering) and non-recognized (e.g., rioting)

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practices of participation, generate *sui generis* forms of engagement which question existing boundaries between "participation" and "non-participation".

First, applying the concept of liminality to the analysis of youth participation is relevant to shed light on the potential for innovation entailed in marginalized youth practices. According to Turner (1969), the liminal phase is, in fact, distinguished by a dialectic relationship between structure and "anti-structure," during which culturally recognized classifications, positions, and definition no longer apply. In this perspective, liminal practices are potentially innovative, as they set the basis for "the reformulation of old elements in new patterns" (Turner, 1967: 9). This conceptualization resonates with Lotman's (2005) argument that "borders" are places where creativity emerges because the controlling power of the center becomes weaker and Bhabha's (1994: 72) theorization of borders as "third spaces" where an "overlap and displacement of domains of difference" occurs. Consequently, analyzing marginalized youth participation as liminal participation allows to shift the attention away from existing classifications and definitions to the innovative potential of observed practices.

Second, applying this concept to youth participation is useful also to recognize engagement as a dynamic process rather than a stable state. Liminality highlights that youth practices are in constant transformation due to (interconnected) temporal and spatial processes of change (Feixa et al. 2016). From a temporal perspective, liminality allows to acknowledge that youth practices are related to the dynamic and transitory nature of young people's lives and to their condition of "not quite adults" (Settersten and Ray, 2010). From a spatial dimension, liminality resonates with the concept of social space and emphasizes the fact that human beings turn geographical space into relevant places through practices of spacing involving meaning-making (Löw, 2016). In so doing, the concept allows to understand that marginalized practices are often practices developing in spaces which are subject to conflicting interests and meanings of different actors.

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Finally, liminality allows to consider conditions of “relational in-betweenness” in young people’s citizenship. As argued by many, young people are not granted full citizenship status, but largely represent “denizens” who, while being recognized as formal citizens are deprived of the possibility to be legitimate political actors (Pickard and Bessant 2018; Dalton, 2008; Farthing, 2010). Liminality, therefore, allows to analyze inclusion and exclusion as processes that might not apply to the totality of the lives, identities and practices of the actors involved.

In this perspective, exploring liminality in youth participation is a way to better understand marginalized forms of participation as practices which “[undo] the perceptible divisions” and make “visible what had no business being seen, and [make] heard a discourse where once there was only place for noise” (Rancière, 1998: 30).

4. Case studies and presentation of fieldwork

As anticipated, in this article the concept of liminality will be used to explore three forms of youth participation which have been studied in the framework of the project [project title]. This project aimed at reconstructing meanings of youth participation by analyzing practices of young people in public spaces. The research included 48 in-depth case studies of different settings of youth participation: formal ones addressing participation in an explicit and institutionalized way (like youth councils); non-formal ones providing young people semi-institutionalized opportunities to develop own interests (like youth work); and informal ones which are neither initiated nor led by adults and are not necessarily perceived as participation by the young people involved in them.

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The three analyzed cases are examples of informal and youth-led participation. Moreover, compared to other informal cases constituted exclusively of non-recognized practices, these cases have been selected because they combine both recognized and non-recognized practices of participation. In particular, 'Lucha', the social center in Bologna, combines volunteering in community projects with migrants and children with political protest and illegal practices like squatting. 'Freccia', the ultras center, combines subcultural practices of violence and vandalism with volunteering and cultural events. The 'Hoodboys', the graffiti crew from Frankfurt, combines murals – culturally accepted and commissioned forms of art – with criminalized practices such as tagging. The peculiar combination of recognized and non-recognized practices in the considered cases offers the opportunity to study why and how young people develop liminal practices and how they deal with the challenges resulting from liminal positions. Developing at the margins of what is institutionally accepted as participation and attempting to combine recognized and non-recognized practices, the three cases differ in the reasons leading young people to develop liminal forms of practice and in the ways of coping with the challenges that an in-between position implies.

Ethnographies were conducted on each case combining biographical interviews, participant observations and group discussions. In average one group discussions and 15 interviews have been conducted for each case study while several periods of observations between May 2015 and April 2018 allowed researchers to follow the groups' dynamics over time and the evolution of their practices and relationships with institutions. Observations have been documented in fieldnotes, while group discussions and interviews have been audio-recorded and fully transcribed. All materials have been subjected to an open coding process following a grounded theory approach developing sensitizing concepts and interpretive categories (Charmaz, 2008).

Being based in different European cities and in the context of different national welfare states and youth policies, the case studies allow for an analysis of how different groups of young people deal with the boundaries between "right" and "wrong" participation introduced by the aforementioned dominant narratives of participation, while recognizing the influence of different local contexts on youth actions (***, 2006). Even if

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the urban areas – Bologna and Frankfurt – in which the cases are situated are comparable in being major cities of their countries characterized by robust and dynamic economies and high proportions of university students among the population, the institutionalization of the youth phase at the national level differs. In Germany, youth welfare is highly developed and differentiated, yet it primarily addresses young people as needing education and protection. Youth participation develops within a strongly structured context where non-institutionalized youth repertories of actions struggle to find spaces for autonomous development. In Italy, the youth phase has, for a long time, been characterized by an institutional deficit that leaves young people in a condition of dependence from their families. This lack of institutional attention makes room to non-institutionalized youth-led participatory practices that, however, receive only limited support in terms of attention and resources.

Although the qualitative and limited nature of the study do not allow for a generalization of the emerging results on a large scale, we believe that the contrasting case studies' contexts and activities, generate findings that are relevant beyond the single cases.

5. Doing and coping with liminality

In this section, we will first describe the groups' activities to explain how their position of liminality emerges. Then we will analyze how the groups deal with the challenges of their liminal position and finally discuss the differences between the groups' paths towards and experiences of liminality.

Participating from a liminal position

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In the three cases, “in-betweenness” develops from the combination of the non-recognized practices of participation the groups were originally involved in (e.g., squatting, rioting, graffiti) with recognized forms of involvement in the public sphere (e.g., volunteering, organizing cultural events, painting commissioned artworks). Although for all groups we observed a similar evolution, their liminal position is achieved differently and for different reasons.

In the case of Lucha, liminality consists in the combination of series of protest activities common to left-wing radical activism (from squatting the barrack to demonstrations, riots, flash-mobs, sabotages, and sit-ins) with social practices addressing the surrounding community (e.g., homeless shelter, kindergarten, Italian school for migrants, and a library) and the involvement in institutionalized processes and spaces of democracy (e.g., running in local elections, campaigning for political referendums). These different types of actions are complementary and inseparable elements of Lucha’s identity and are consciously used “in combination” as a strategy to avoid being defined in a reductive way.

> Damian explains Lucha’s strategy saying that they want to “avoid definition. It is not about being the good guys *or* the bad guys. It is about being the good *and* bad”. He says they “must avoid remaining trapped in the labels of activists, volunteers, or politicians” (Fieldnotes, 2017).

By combining these practices, young people from Lucha actively seek to question the strict lines that divide politics, volunteering, and radical activism. Merging different forms of participation, the group aims to create a “hybrid reality which has the capacity to avoid definitions and discover itself in its diversity” (Interview with Tiziano, 2016). As explained in the social center’s first public statement, Lucha was born to be an “element of anomaly [seeking to] transform what already exists in an experimental and shattering way” (Lucha’s first public statement, 2012). In the case of Lucha, the

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“genuine hybridization” (Informal conversation with Tonino, 2017) between non-recognized and recognized practices develops, thus, as a conscious strategical choice that shapes the group’s activities from the very beginning.

This path towards liminality differs considerably from that of the young ultras. Freccia, the ultras center, represents a hybrid constellation as, on the one hand, it is used to organize events and projects for the local population (e.g., a kid’s corner, a popular free gym, concerts) while on the other hand, it is also the space where young ultras organize fights and other controversial activities that are common to their subculture.

> At Freccia I see the young ultras sitting together at the same table, very concentrated, reading stuff. I ask them what they are doing. Paolo says: “We are planning the musical events for this spring.” Leonardo says: “We are discussing strategies for tomorrow’s fight with [ultras from Florence].” Their voices overlap. (Fieldnotes, 2016).

However, when they decided to open Freccia, the young ultras intended only to create a headquarters for their activities. Starting a project for the whole community was not in their minds from the very beginning and developed only as a necessity to “come to terms” with the authorities to not be evicted.

> The group has signed an agreement with the Municipality […] they will have the space for one year and, in exchange, they have committed to organize a series of social and cultural activities […] The agreement could be renewed if the Municipality think they have done a good job (Fieldnotes, 2016).

Hence, in this case study, liminality does not develop as a choice, but as a survival strategy and a compromise between the group’s subcultural identity and dominant ideas of “right” ways of participation.

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A similar path toward liminality can be observed in the case of the Frankfurt graffiti crew. Graffiti is a cultural practice characterized by ambivalence: when it takes the form of street-art (e.g., murals) in legal places it is recognized as a form of art, while, when it takes the form of tagging or "masterpieces" (complex writing with 3D elements, a wide range of colors, and other visual marks) in illegal places is perceived as vandalism and criminalized.

In the case of the Hoodboys, it was possible to observe how young people switch between doing graffiti illegally, doing commissioned street-art and painting in legal institutional spaces where they are allowed to practice and improve their skills. Painting in institutional spaces or drawing commissioned artworks allow them to engage in their practices in a way that is recognized by institutional actors and the wider society and to economically sustain their activities (e.g., obtaining money that they use to buy spray cans). However, painting in illegal spots remains relevant for the group as it allows the group to acquire "fame" in the graffiti scene.

> [Fame is] connected to illegality due to the speed [needed to do the pieces]. It should be visible how the color was applied, and the lines should be clean […] It shows how fast you can paint and that you are in control of the spray can [even in a dangerous situation]. (Interview, Dominic, 2016).

In the Hoodboys' perspective, doing graffiti is an attempt to "appropriate" the city and, as illegal spots are harder to reach than legal ones, illegal pieces last longer and provide more visibility of the group's presence in the city.

> A legal piece is probably gone the next day, you invest 50 € or 100 € for one piece, you get a photo of it and it is gone in an hour, because […] there are too few legal spots [and everyone will paint there]. (Group discussion, 2016).

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Trying to balance between the need for visibility and fame and the need to avoid criminal charges, the group develops liminality in intermediate spaces called "ghetto spots." These are "places where one can 'chill' and not attract any attention […] Such as under a bridge" (Fieldnotes, 2016) and combine the possibilities offered by legal spaces, with the opportunity to gain the prestige that is generally associated with the illegal ones. Hence, also for the Hoodboys, "in-betweenness" develops as a compromise which allows the group to safeguard its subcultural identity.

Coping with the challenges of liminality

When achieved, liminality is a condition which entails both opportunities and risks; it therefore needs to be actively managed. For the three cases presented here, merging non-recognized and recognized forms requires conscious efforts to communicate to other actors that their practices are more than expressions of illegality and troublemaking. However, maintaining a certain degree of non-recognition from institutional actors is also important to remain true to their original identities and corresponding bases. Since neither complete formalization nor returning to a position of total illegality are realistic options, the groups have to deal with liminality. The groups cope with these challenges by engaging in acts that position themselves in-between what institutional actors recognize—or not—as forms of participation.

Lucha sees liminal practices of participation as the potential beginning of a process of societal change and liminality becomes a "method" through which the group strategically tries to expand existing boundaries of democratic participation. Although Lucha's activists understand liminality mainly as a choice and an opportunity, they are aware that the acquired liminal positions entail specific challenges, particularly in terms of risks of normalization and de-radicalization of their identity.

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> When you do this [helping migrants], there is a risk is to be perceived as a Red Cross's center […] to be misunderstood as non-political, non-radical, non-contentious (Interview, Andrea, 2017).

To avoid this risk, the group pays particular attention to continuously mix symbols and languages that are associated with recognized forms of engagement (e.g., volunteering, participating in elections) with symbols and languages that are associated with non-recognized forms of protest (e.g., radical activism).

> Lucha's activists have decided to run for the local elections in an attempt to save the social center from the eviction and have elaborated a leaflet. One side of it looks very "professional": it explains that "Lucha runs for the election to defend another idea of the neighborhood" […] On the other side, instead, there is a picture of the activists and […] a message inviting "to fight for Lucha" combined with anti-fascist and feminist symbols. (Fieldnotes, 2016)

To cope with the challenges of their liminal position, Lucha's activists engage in a conscious attempt to *make liminality ubiquitous* by "politicizing" volunteering and "destigmatizing" radical practices to the point of making the boundary disappear.

Challenges of liminality are more demanding for groups like the ultras, whose members are kept together primarily by a strong subcultural identity that is by its own definition confrontational and violent toward any form of state authority. Such opposition is frequently expressed through clashes with police and other ultras groups, riots in the street, and vandalism. For the ultras, replacing the non-recognized parts of their collective identity with a process of institutionalization implies risking losing a core identity value.

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The solution they adopt to deal with liminality consists in enforcing a discursive distinction between Freccia and the stadium that allows the ultras to maintain their status within the ultras community while engaging in collaboration with the same authorities they are in conflict with.

> “Freccia is one thing, the stadium is another” explain me Fabio: “Freccia is a space were everybody can come, the stadium is a space for ultras” (Fieldnotes, 2016)

However, boundaries between volunteering and ultras activities tend to be blurred as the group’s weekly assemblies are held at Freccia, which is also the group’s “refuge” in case of attacks from other crews and the space where they prepare for the next match. *Discursively negating liminality,* the group managed to turn the more recognized practices of their participation into a kind of ‘pivot foot’—something which gives stability to their moves, rather than weakening them. The pivot foot helps the ultras secure resources and recognition that they would normally be denied and provide continuity to their subcultural activities without undermining their authenticity.

Also in the Hoodboys’ case, liminality challenges the subcultural identity of the group. Painting in legal spots and doing commissioned street-art provides the group the recognition that is commonly attributed to arts and allows them to collect funds to sustain their activities. However, being associated with arts also means losing their ‘true’ identity and subcultural credibility.

> Graffiti is not art. When people say, “graffiti is art,” it is just because they see the faces and the trees in the background, but they do not recognize the style of […] the writing, it is always referred to as scrawl… but that is graffiti! Saying it is art doesn't make sense. (Group discussion, 2016).

To cope with this ambivalence, the Hoodboys use different styles of doing graffiti in different spaces to differentiate their publics. Figurative elements (e.g., drawings of animals or objects) are included in pieces that they paint in legal spots which, however, are not signed with the crew’s name. Instead, the tags and

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masterpieces they paint illegally in public spaces do not include figurative elements and are signed by the crew. Switching between different styles and spaces serves the need of balancing different 'currencies' of recognition from different actors: the wider society - which is not familiar with graffiti but moves within public space - and the other urban crews – from which they can obtain "fame". Wider society provides both recognition combined with resources and misrecognition that fuels group identity. Other sprayers provide recognition in terms of being competent members of the graffiti scene. An expression of their continuous movement between both publics and forms of recognition (and their negative implications) are the so-called "ghetto spots", spaces of semi-visibility guaranteeing masterpieces and tags longer life at a lower risk. In this perspective, the Hoodboys cope with the challenges of hybridity switching continuously between different styles and spaces. *Juggling their liminality*, the young members of the graffiti crew move in-between dichotomies of (il)legality and (non)recognition creating niches to express themselves.

Liminality and recognition: comparative reflections

The three cases develop liminal forms of participation in a similar ambition to find a balance between the opportunities and limitations offered by public and institutional recognition and the freedom and risks that result from renouncing to official recognition. Moreover, the position of liminality entails similar risks and challenges for the groups as their original (subcultural) identity is threatened by the interactions with the institutions and communities fostered by the inclusion of recognized practices in their repertoire of action.

However, the comparative analysis of the cases shows that groups do and cope with liminality differently. While for Lucha liminal participation emerges as a conscious choice that give young people the opportunity to enact ambitious political experiments in the city, liminality is a matter of necessity for the ultras and the Hoodboys, who become liminal to survive in an environment that severely ostracize their practices.

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Moreover, while Lucha's activists deal with the challenges of liminality embracing hybridity to the point of making it a defining trait of all their activities, the ultras of Freccia and the Hoodboys have to develop double identities to secure formal recognition while staying true to their subcultures.

If, as discussed above, we consider participation as a status that is ascribed to youth practices only when they both conform to existing norms and are considered relevant for a wider community, it is possible to notice that the groups' different constellations of liminality largely depend on the different interests and missions expressed.

[Figure 2: *Constellations of liminality*]

As shown in Fig. 2, all the three groups move from a condition of complete non-conformity to a hybrid condition where deviant practices are combined with practices that conform with the norms. However, while all Lucha's practices – protesting, volunteering, and engaging in elections – address the wider community and aim at improving society, Freccia and the Hoodboys follow a more particularistic agenda. In the case of Freccia, activities that may be perceived as following purposes of public interest (e.g., organization of cultural events) are combined with activities that follow only particularistic interest (e.g., squatting to create their own headquarters). In the case of the Hoodboys, both illegal graffiti and legal artworks express the groups' claim for using public space and thus follow a particularistic agenda.

From this perspective, Lucha's activists have more control over their condition of liminality than the ultras and the Hoodboys because their collective, non-particularistic agenda allows them to negotiate dominant ideas of "right" ways of participation from a stronger moral position. Even when Lucha's activists engage in rioting and protest, the collective agenda ensures them a partial recognition that the ultras and the Hoodboys

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can only achieve by hiding their non-recognized practices behind a façade of conformity. Engaging in liminal practices, for the ultras, and the graffiti crew, does not mean obtaining full recognition, but only (temporarily) avoid criminalization. Hence, although liminality implies similar experiences and challenges related to the problem of authenticity and a more or less articulated need to find "allies" beyond the own subculture, the resulting level of dependency from demands for conformity differs.

6. Conclusions

Our analysis has dealt with forms of youth participation that are positioned in a *limen* (van Gennep, 1909; Turner, 1967) between what society understands as deviance and acknowledges as the "right" way of participation. The practices of political protest, voluntary engagement, and youth cultural activities we have analyzed show that young people must deal with the boundaries between "right" and "wrong" forms of youth participation enforced by dominant narratives on youth engagement to avoid stigmatization and criminalization and eventually to receive institutional support (i.e., spaces or economic resources). Due to the small sample in terms of analyzed practices and contexts the analysis can claim generalization only to limited degree. Constellations may be different across different continents, European countries, and cities as well as across practices. However, we suggest – and hope to stimulate further research in this respect – that struggles for recognition of practices in public spaces resulting in hybrid forms of participation between recognition and non-recognition are widespread in young people's ways of taking part to society. Indeed, we would argue that especially classical notions of participation tend to neglect contextual specificities looking at practices enacted by young people with different lives in different contexts through the same conceptual lenses. In this light, we encourage to look for hidden claims of participation also in young people's practices that, at first sight, do not look like what is normally referred to as participation and to consider that even practices that look similar may have different meanings for the actors involved .

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Liminal participation stands for forms of engagement which cannot be completely reduced to the classic dichotomies applied to young people's practices in the public sphere and its analysis therefore contributes to better understanding youth participation on three different levels: First, the study of liminal practices requires researchers to go beyond existing analytical categories and brings young people's actions and meanings at the center. Looking at points where culturally dominant classifications no longer apply (Turner 1967), an analysis of liminal practices provides insight into where young people themselves draw the line between participation and non-participation and contributes to a better comprehension of their definitions of citizenship.

Second, exploring liminality means unpacking the ceaseless process through which young people adjust their practices to deal with sudden or progressive changes occurring in the spaces and times they inhabit. In this perspective, observing blurring boundaries offers a deeper understanding of the lived experience of young people's participation and of how time, space, and youth conditions (Feixa et al., 2016) contribute to the on-going evolution of youth practices in the public sphere. Last, the concept of liminality allows to analyze boundaries as sites of struggle between young people's ideas of participation and institutionalized normative ideas of "right" and "wrong" participation. Studying liminal youth participation reveals different constellations of incorporating participants into dominant forms of social life (van Gennep, 1909). Reincorporation or normalization can mean expanding existing boundaries of democracy to include young people's practices, it can imply pressuring young people to adapt to what society recognizes as relevant, or – where it does not occur – young people are marginalized from the public sphere. Analyzing liminal participation means exploring if, when, how, and at which cost young people cross boundaries between recognized and non-recognized realms of participation and it is relevant to understand if and to what extent a democratic system is open to change. Thus, marginalized forms of young people's engagement as participation can be interpreted in the sense of "a process whereby a given regime of visibility—an order that regulates what is 'common-sensical' within a society—is interrupted by an egalitarian and dissensual logic

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that disrupts its naturalness" (Rancière, 1998: 30). Liminal participation reveals the constitutive role that dynamics of antagonism and conflict have for democracy in a radical sense (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985) and nurtures an understanding of democracy as an ongoing process rather than an established state and institutionalized order. In sum, reconsidering participation at the boundaries of what is recognized as participation implies reconsidering established concepts of democracy and politics to which they refer.

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