Youth Political Participation and Critical Consciousness: Exploring Pathways to Emancipation

by *Daniela Bianchi*

Abstract

This contribution, drawing on Paulo Freire's theory of conscientisation, explores how young people critically engage with political structures, confront marginalisation, and develop emancipatory awareness within democratic processes. Employing a qualitative, phenomenological approach, this study analyses data from in-depth online interviews with young members of European youth organisations. The research highlights that young people experience structural marginalisation within political systems, often finding their voices undervalued in decision-making processes. Some participants described personal experiences of injustice as catalysts for their political engagement, while others developed critical awareness through exposure to structural inequalities. The findings reveal that critical consciousness does not emerge spontaneously but is driven by personal and collective motivations and sustained through structured opportunities for reflection and action. By examining these dynamics, this study explores the relationship between youth activism and critical consciousness, showing how engagement in activism enables young people not only to contest injustice but also to critically analyse power structures and recognise their role within them. Rather than viewing youth-led activism as a peripheral mode of participation, this contribution underscores its significance as a key space where young people cultivate critical awareness, connect personal experiences to broader social structures, and engage in transformative action.
Keywords: youth, political participation, critical consciousness, emancipation, qualitative research.

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The Foundations of Critical Consciousness in Freirean Pedagogy

Critical consciousness, originally conceptualised by Paulo Freire, is recognised as a pedagogical approach aimed at enabling marginalised individuals to critically analyse the economic, political, historical, and social forces that contribute to systemic inequities and to empower them to instigate change (Freire, 1970, 1973). Freire termed this process "conscientização," translated into English as "conscientisation," describing it as a dialectical interplay between reflection and action. Through engagement with others, individuals examine their experiences of oppression, identifying its historical, social, and economic origins. Central to Freirean pedagogy, dialogue facilitates the development of critical awareness, enabling individuals to understand the structural causes of their marginalisation, take transformative action, and refine their comprehension of oppression through praxis (Freire, 1970). Conscientisation enables individuals to critically assess their circumstances and to become historical subjects-conscious agents within human history. This process fosters the development of critical consciousness as a means of understanding historically subordinated groups (Mayo, 2008). It cultivates a continuous critical attitude, allowing individuals to actively position themselves within the world rather than merely adapting to it (Freire, 1970).

Through the reflective analysis of their existence, individuals discern their opportunities within the social reality. This awareness emerges primarily through a dialectical movement between critical reflection and action in the emancipation process. The concept carries an inherently political-pedagogical connotation, underscoring the inextricable link between thought and action. In this regard, the recognition of structural exploitation, for instance, cannot be divorced from transformative initiatives aimed at challenging such conditions. For Freire, the necessity of a pedagogy of the oppressed stems from the recognition of an unjust social order, which undermines a fundamental aspect of human existence: humanity itself. Humanisation represents the process through which individuals attain self-awareness, understanding their modes of action and thought, as well as their active role within society (Freire, 1970).

This perspective positions the oppressed as agents of human restoration. In striving to reclaim their humanity without perpetuating oppression, they fulfil the significant humanist and historical task of liberation, not only for themselves but also for their oppressors. Liberation, therefore, is not an incidental outcome but the product of a collective pursuit, facilitated by an education that critically examines oppression and its causes. Such reflection fosters a commitment to reclaiming the humanity that has been denied.

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Within this framework, liberation assumes an inherently collective dimension; it is not an individual undertaking, nor is it the action of one person freeing another. Rather, emancipation is a mutual process, mediated through engagement with the world (Freire, 1970).

Youth Political Participation and Critical Consciousness

In recent years, youth political participation has gained increasing prominence in academic, policy, and institutional discussions, reflecting broader concerns about democratic engagement and the need for inclusive governance (Bárta et al., 2021). More than three decades after the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), young people's rights to active citizenship have been increasingly recognised (Gal & Duramy, 2015; McMellon & Tisdall, 2020). Institutions have responded to concerns about youth disengagement by investing in initiatives that promote young people as active citizens, acknowledging their essential role in sustaining democratic systems (Tisdall et al., 2021). However, despite these efforts, young people remain structurally marginalised within formal political processes, facing significant barriers to meaningful participation (Kitanova, 2020). In response to these limitations, many young people seek alternative pathways for political engagement beyond traditional electoral mechanisms. Frustration with conventional politics, alongside growing mistrust towards political elites, has led youth to explore new and often informal spaces of participation, including grassroots activism, digital mobilisation, and transnational advocacy (della Porta & Portos, 2022; Sloam & Henn, 2018). For many, political participation becomes not only a means of influencing decision-making but also a vehicle for self-empowerment and emancipation, allowing them to challenge entrenched inequalities and advocate for structural change.

Among young people, it is crucial to recognise that some face even deeper forms of exclusion, as inequalities based on race, ethnicity, and other social factors further limit their access to political participation (Macedo et al., 2005). Marginalised groups, in particular, tend to have fewer resources and opportunities to influence decision-making, as political knowledge and access to participatory spaces remain unevenly distributed (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1997).

The concept of critical consciousness is most frequently employed to examine the experiences of marginalised youth who face structural oppression in their daily lives and social environments, equipping them with the awareness, agency, and engagement necessary to navigate and challenge

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oppressive structures (Godfrey & Burson, 2018; Watts et al., 2011). Through critical consciousness, such individuals develop the capacity to read the world and cultivate the motivation to challenge inequities that constrain self-determination – that is, the ability to shape one's life path with fewer constraints imposed by structural oppression (Freire, 1970).

Critical consciousness theory posits that direct dialogue and collective action are essential for fostering the ability of marginalised individuals to critique and challenge structural oppression, thereby enabling greater autonomy over their lives (Watts et al., 2003, 2011). Nonetheless, critical consciousness is equally relevant for more privileged youth, as it enables them to comprehend systems of power, recognise their own privilege within these systems, and collaborate with others to effect social change (Godfrey & Rapa, 2023; Frisby & Diemer, 2024; Seider et al., 2023). By situating their experiences within a broader context of historical injustice, these individuals may develop a clearer understanding of how they can contribute to social transformation (Pinedo et al., 2024). While Freire (1970) regarded critical consciousness as fundamental to the liberation of oppressed peoples, he did not suggest that it was irrelevant to those in dominant social positions. Rather, he maintained that those who benefit from oppression can cultivate critical consciousness if they are willing to engage in solidarity with the oppressed. Although less research has examined the role of critical consciousness among privileged groups, scholars increasingly recognise the importance of fostering a critical stance towards systemic inequities among those who hold social power. Encouraging privileged individuals to acknowledge their positionality and engage in solidarity with marginalised groups is essential for dismantling entrenched systems of oppression (Spanierman & Smith, 2017). Importantly, the development of critical consciousness should not be assumed to occur automatically in marginalised individuals. While structural oppression shapes lived experiences, research demonstrates that marginalised youth also require consciousness-raising systems to cultivate critical awareness (Pinedo et al., 2024; Poteat et al., 2020).

Indeed, structured opportunities for dialogue and action are central to the development of critical consciousness (Freire, 1970, 1978; Golden et al., 2022; Heberle et al., 2020), and youth activism plays a particularly significant role in this process, as participation in social movements fosters both critical reflection and action (Kirshner & Ginwright, 2012; Ginwright, 2006; Terriquez, 2015). Activists report that attending protests and rallies enhances their critical awareness by exposing them to new perspectives (Kornbluh et al., 2020). Long-term involvement in community-based activism, which integrates structural analysis with mentored opportunities

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for action, has been shown to produce sustained growth in critical consciousness (Christens et al., 2023; Pinedo et al., 2024). Such activist spaces, both physical and digital, serve as vital platforms for fostering social awareness and transformative action.

An Empirical Investigation of the Lived Experiences of Young Activists: Exploring Pathways to Critical Consciousness

In this context, it is crucial to explore the meanings that young people themselves attribute to their involvement in political and civic life (van Manen, 2016). A pedagogical approach attuned to these subjective experiences allows for a deeper understanding of how young people navigate, interpret, and reshape democratic spaces. Their participation is not only a means of influencing decision-making but also a process through which they develop critical consciousness-questioning social realities, recognising inequalities, and envisioning transformative possibilities. Building on this perspective, this study explores how young individuals involved in European youth organisations reflect on their political engagement, the challenges they encounter, and the ways in which their experiences contribute to their process of conscientisation.

This research employs a qualitative methodology, rooted in phenomenological principles, to investigate the lived experiences of young individuals involved in public decision-making within European institutions (van Manen, 2014, 2016; Mortari, 2016). Data were gathered through online interviews with 26 young members from key European youth organisations, such as the European Youth Forum and the Advisory Council on Youth (O'Connor & Madge, 2017; Sità, 2012). These interviews took place over a seven-month period, with a snowball sampling technique employed to identify participants who could offer rich, in-depth accounts of their experiences (Emerson, 2015). Conducting the interviews online allowed for the inclusion of participants from a variety of geographical regions across Europe, ensuring a diverse range of perspectives. The data were analysed using thematic analysis, which involved a systematic method of coding interview transcripts to identify recurring themes and patterns (van Manen, 2016). NVivo software was used to facilitate the organisation and management of the data, enabling a thorough exploration of the emerging themes from the interviews (Coppola, 2011).

This contribution specifically explores aspects related to critical consciousness, examining them through the lens of Freire's theory of conscientisation and his pedagogical framework. By adopting this

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perspective, the study conceptualises critical consciousness as a multidimensional construct comprising three interrelated components: critical reflection, critical motivation, and critical action (Diemer et al., 2020; Watts et al., 2011; Watts & Flanagan, 2007). Critical reflection entails the ability to critically analyse social realities and recognise the structural roots of inequality (Watts et al., 2011). Critical motivation refers to an individual's sense of urgency and perceived capacity to combat injustice, often described in the literature as sociopolitical efficacy or critical agency (Diemer et al., 2020; Heberle et al., 2020; McWhirter & McWhirter, 2016). Critical action encompasses participation in efforts to contest or mitigate oppression, whether through direct activism or other forms of resistance (Estes, 2019; Hope et al., 2020).

Motivations

Drawing from the experiences shared by the young interviewees, motivations appear as a fundamental dimension in fostering critical consciousness. The narratives reveal how young people's engagement in political and social activism is driven by deeply personal and collective motivations, shaped by their experiences, aspirations, and the injustices they have witnessed or encountered. These motivations often emerge from a profound sense of frustration with the status quo, or a desire to create more inclusive and democratic spaces.

Some youths highlighted the importance of representing marginalized voices and ensuring their inclusion in decision-making spaces. One interviewee, for instance, expressed a strong commitment to advocating for the representation of underrepresented groups within youth organizations:

> «It's one of those things that really motivates me: to make sure that the world is being run by people who are a little bit less average and a little bit more from backgrounds that haven't been heard before» (Interview 20, 2024).

Their advocacy work, therefore, involved not only fighting for their own voice to be heard but also working tirelessly to create space for others who might otherwise be excluded. Another young person described youth work as a form of resistance against authoritarianism, which seeks to shrink spaces for civic engagement. They viewed youth work as a barometer of societal trends, arguing that advocacy in this sphere was essential for protecting democratic values and pluralism.

A dominant theme that emerged from the interviews was the deep desire for change, which significantly motivated young people to engage in

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decision-making processes. In addition to being the most prominent theme that emerged directly, the desire for change also appeared as a transversal theme, often indirectly underpinning many of the other issues discussed. It was reflected in the youths' aspirations to alter the political and cultural contexts they were navigating. For instance, frustration frequently acted as a catalyst for participation, driving them to engage in order to transform their circumstances, while advocacy efforts were similarly motivated by a desire to instigate meaningful change. Each young person expressed this drive in various ways, shaped by personal histories, societal contexts, and the impact of witnessing both local and global inequalities. Some interviewees expressed a desire to change the world, viewing their activism as a means to address broader societal issues, or as a commitment to challenging and reshaping existing societal structure. For instance, one youth was driven by a strong internal pressure to change the current status quo, particularly in relation to disability rights and accessibility across Europe. They spoke about their inability to accept the existing conditions for people with disabilities, which kept them engaged in advocacy work:

> «I do not accept the current status. I want to have things changed» (Interview 23, 2024).

Another interviewee focused on how their desire for change was tied to addressing gender inequality and patriarchy in their country. They reflected on the systemic issues that they observed growing up, particularly the dominance of men in politics and the workplace. Feeling silenced as a child, they later found their voice through writing and activism, determined to challenge these deeply ingrained societal norms:

> «Always here in [my country] it's nepotism, and men always get better jobs, have more powerful roles in the audience, they are more present in politics. They lead the world here. It's patriarchy, really strong in [my country], and I wanted that to change» (Interview 15, 2023).

For another young person, the desire to dismantle patriarchal and exclusionary practices in their native country was a key driver in her decision to engage in youth organizations. As a female leader in a male-dominated environment, she sought to bring inclusivity to the National Youth Council by hiring individuals from marginalized communities. Their vision for a more democratic and inclusive organization inspired them to push against the entrenched biases within the system:

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«Why did I want to be a part of National Youth Council? Basically, it's quite a bureaucratic organization because it's funded by government here. And basically, all the boards and all the chair people before me, like presidents before me, all were men, and it was managed in the patriarchal construct. With lack of inclusion, lack of democratic processes within the organization. I wanted to bring those values to National Youth Council, because they were also an umbrella for other 100 plus youth organizations in [my country], so I was hoping that I can touch a lot of youth organizations and how they work, by bringing my experience, my values and approaches» (Interview 12, 2023).

Reflection and Action

The interviews yielded a rich tapestry of insights from the young people, capturing their reflections on their experiences and the discoveries and realizations they have made along the pathway. Several young participants shared pivotal experiences that align with Paulo Freire's concept of conscientisation. For instance, one interviewee, reflecting on their upbringing, shared how their early life seemed "normal", with no immediate crises affecting them or their family: «I had a normal upbringing... you go to school, you work hard, finances can be a bit tight sometimes, but you can still hang out with friends». It wasn't until later in their youth, after moving to another country and becoming involved in the youth sector, that they began to see the limitations and inequalities within the political system. As their awareness grew, they began to recognise the barriers that disadvantaged communities face:

«If you come from a marginalized background, if you come from a disadvantaged or non-traditional background... there are more barriers, undoubtedly. You question yourself more» (Interview 25, 2024).

This critical awareness drove them to challenge the status quo and work to make the political sphere more inclusive. They noticed that many young people in leadership positions came from privileged backgrounds, prompting them to act:

«Most of the people that are going for big positions tend to be from a particular background. Let me try and change this» (Interview 25, 2024).

In this sense, their journey aligns with Freire's notion that conscientisation leads to action – an awakening to social injustices and a commitment to transform oppressive structures. Similarly, another interviewee spent part of their childhood living abroad, where they were

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exposed to a highly participatory school environment. However, upon returning to their home country, they quickly realised the stark differences in how decision-making processes were structured. They described their frustration with the lack of participation in decision-making processes:

> «When I moved back, it felt very different. Nobody asked for my opinion anymore. The school director made all the decisions, and the students weren't involved at all» (Interview 17, 2024).

This realisation highlighted the authoritarian structures in their home country, where young people had little to no influence over decisions that affected them. It marked the beginning of their critical engagement with the political and social realities in their community. Their awareness deepened when they observed how youth participation mechanisms were manipulated by older generations for political purposes. They noted that in their country, youth representatives were often chosen by politicians, rather than by the young people themselves:

> «You have these platforms, but it's the politicians who decide who represents the youth. It completely misses the point of youth participation […] The most important part is that young people decide who represents them, not the politicians. That's the key to meaningful participation» (Interview 17, 2024).

Their growing awareness of how political structures in their country had been misused to suppress genuine youth participation fuelled their desire for change and motivated them to advocate for a more authentic and democratic form of youth participation.

Some of the young people interviewed, though not from backgrounds marked by oppression, experienced moments of critical realisation when confronted with the inequalities and injustices around them. Through their involvement in various initiatives, they began to recognise their own privilege and develop a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by others. For example, one young person experienced a profound shift in awareness through their involvement with various volunteer projects:

> «It made me question why I was living such a good life when there was so much injustice in the world. I felt socially indebted, like my privilege attracts responsibility» (Interview 10, 2023).

This moment of awareness led them to reflect on their privileged position and their responsibility to use that privilege to help others. This sense of duty drove them to become more actively involved in organisations, where they

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engaged in educational projects with children from disadvantaged backgrounds, including those from orphanages and marginalised communities. One particularly impactful moment for them came during a summer kindergarten programme, where they worked with children who had never been to school before:

> «It was a shock to actually realise that also in [my city] we were having these situations in which we had families that couldn't provide for themselves. So it was, I would say, a second wave in my brain of the world is not as pinkie dust as you thought some time ago» (Interview 10, 2023).

This realisation deeply influenced them, grounding them in a commitment to work towards justice from her position of privilege. Similarly, another interviewee reflected on their experience of privilege and how it contrasted with the wider societal realities. Although they had always been aware of inequality, it was through their work in decision-making processes that they truly understood the extent of the exclusion faced by marginalised groups:

«The world doesn't look like the meeting room that I'm sitting in […] there's no excuse anymore to have meeting rooms with only men. There's no excuse to have meeting rooms with only boomers. I mean, this is what the world still looks like. And I think there are people saying, 'Ah, but young people are more included, people of colour are more included'. No, they are not. I've learned this the hard way. You know, we have so much more to do as a society. That, I mean, it makes me a little bit sad, actually, that we haven't had more progress. People are saying, 'We're making this progress'. We're not. We're not making progress as societies. We're actually going back right now. And every day I'm learning it more and more. We're doing so much work, and it feels like in the big picture we are going backwards. Even if we're getting those small wins here and there. So that's very frustrating» (Interview 5, 2023).

These reflections underscore how critical awareness is not a static realisation but an evolving process that continues to shape young people's engagement with the world around them. Through their experiences, they moved from passive recognition of inequalities to active efforts to dismantle oppressive structures, illustrating the transformative potential of critical consciousness in driving meaningful social and political change.

Conclusions

This contribution has explored the development of critical consciousness

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among young people engaged in political participation, highlighting how their trajectories within youth activism and decision-making processes have facilitated their conscientisation. The findings illustrate that motivation, reflection, and action are deeply interwoven components of this process, each reinforcing the others in a dynamic and reciprocal relationship. Drawing on Freire's framework (1970), the narratives of young people demonstrate how engagement in political and civic spaces has fostered their ability to critically analyse social structures, recognise injustices, and take action to challenge them.

A key insight emerging from both theoretical perspectives and empirical evidence is that critical consciousness is not confined to marginalised youth. While all young people experience some degree of political marginalisation (Kitanova, 2020), they also share, to varying extents, a drive for emancipation within political processes. Youth often find themselves in positions of limited influence, with their voices undervalued in decision-making arenas (Loncle et al., 2012; Tisdall et al., 2021). This structural exclusion fosters a collective need to assert agency and claim political space. At the same time, as this study has shown, young people from different backgrounds – and experiencing different degrees and forms of marginalisation – engage with critical consciousness in diverse ways. For those facing systemic oppression, participation in political spaces becomes a means of resistance and survival, transforming personal struggles into collective advocacy. For young people from more privileged backgrounds, engagement in activism and youth organisations often acts as a catalyst for recognising their position within broader systems of power, prompting a critical reflection on privilege and responsibility towards social change. Despite these differences, what unites them is the pursuit of greater political agency and the struggle to be recognised as legitimate actors in shaping their societies.

These observations are not intended to suggest rigid dichotomies or prescriptive categories. Rather, they represent reflective insights emerging from the lived experiences and situated narratives of the young people involved in this study. What has been presented here should be understood not as definitive conclusions, but as openings for deeper pedagogical reflection.

In light of these considerations, the research reaffirms that critical consciousness does not emerge spontaneously. Instead, it requires structured and intentional spaces that enable young people to engage in dialogue, reflect on their experiences, and connect individual struggles to broader social structures. As Freire (1976) argues, one of the most significant educational imperatives is the creation of spaces for conscientisation-moments in which

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individuals can rediscover themselves through reflection on their own existence. Education, therefore, must actively cultivate these opportunities, fostering environments where young people can critically engage with the world, challenge oppressive conditions, and envision emancipatory alternatives.

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