

Students back to the Charter (of the University): An Experience across Education, Empowerment of Young People and Political Commitment

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In the last years, the student movement in most Italian universities organised a number of protests in which young people requested the policy makers – who were at the time reforming the undergraduate and post-graduate programmes – to put the student at the heart of the educational process. These manifestations have never been adequately translated into direct policy change. However, they are a testimony of the presence of a political demand; they express the will of a generation to gain access to effective instruments of participation. It seems to me that it is a diffused opinion that the student movement has directly passed from a period of barbarity (1968) to a period of decadence (i.e. the contemporary youth conformism), without transiting through an inter-period of, if you like, civility.

In these pages I will try to prove that this perceived decadence is not all-encompassing; I will report a student experience that started at the Faculty of Political Science of the University of Padova. In September 2003 about forty students and former students established the association «Osservatorio studentesco sulla politica internazionale *Altiero Spinelli*» (Students Observatory on International Politics *Altiero Spinelli*). This initiative could be considered as the «structural outcome» of two workshops promoted within the Faculty's courses of International Relations and Political Systems of the EU. After two years of activities the association has launched several projects of informal education; OSPI-Spinelli has also built a solid co-operation with the Human Rights Centre of the University, the Municipality of Padua, the Faculty of Political Science, some local student associations and other NGOs. I will argue that the University – which represents a significant social environment for the promotion of forms of shared and proactive education – could fulfil institutional goals such as the empowerment of young people, the development of policies

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and positive measures concerning their participation and the promotion of their human rights. I would finally point out that this experience embodies the philosophy of the youth policies recommended by international organisations such as the Council of Europe, the European Union and the United Nations.

1. The Iraqi Crisis and the European Convention: Youth on the Foot of Peace

On 12 December 2002, Kofi Annan, wrote to Antonio Papisca, Professor of International Relations at the University of Padova: «Please convey my appreciation and support to your students as they seek to understand how the principles of the United Nations Charter can be better applied in an extremely complicated and volatile world». The Secretary-General referred to a workshop on ongoing monitoring of the situation in Iraq organised by twelve students under the supervision of Professor Papisca. This working group collected information concerning the international conduct of the UN Security Council's states regarding the situation in Iraq until the adoption of UNSC Resolution 1483. The students notably focused on the role of the UNSCOM and IAEA Iraq action team; they intended to conceptualise how the Security Council could deal with the issue coherently while acting under the Charter's provisions. The workshop also included the simulation of a UN Security Council session: the participants, using the original rules of procedure, simulated the adoption of a draft-resolution which provided a comprehensive strategy for the crisis. The main message that the group desired to convey was that the United Nations Charter clearly outlined the directives for an adequate management of a crisis situation. The next step was to involve the rest of the University community, the local organisations of civil society and other members of the community. On 30 January, the students submitted the text of an appeal to the Italian Government and Parliament with regard to the Iraqi situation to the Council of the Course in Political Science and International Relations. As a result of this proposal, the Faculty of Political Science hosted several debates. Simultaneously with the evolution of the Iraqi crisis, the

international arena faced another key issue: the negotiation of the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe by an *ad hoc* body; the Constitution for the future of Europe. The Laeken Declaration – which represents the basis of this organ – referred to the necessity of a broad involvement of civil society and of a *milieu* that could accommodate their contribution. In the Laeken Declaration the establishment of virtual forum «opened for organisations representing civil society (the social partners, the business world, non-governmental organisations, and academia)» can be found. In other words, the European Council, interested in gaining legitimacy for the «Constitution for Europe», asked European citizens to activate a dialogue with the Conventional body about their expectations. Establishing the Convention, European leaders agreed that the Union «has to resolve three basic challenges: how to bring citizens, *and primarily the young*, closer to the European design and the European institutions, how to organise politics and the European political area in an enlarged Union and how to develop the Union into a stabilising factor and a model in the new, multipolar world»¹.

At the time, fifteen students of the Faculty Course of the Political System of the EU were already monitoring the external action of the EU regarding the Iraqi crisis; they arranged with Professor Marco Mascia to become part of the process of consultation by publishing a report/contribution to the Convention. They started analysing the documents published by the sub-working groups of the Convention and following the broader civil debate that accompanied the work. The initiative has been presented at the Conference «The contribution of the Italian University for the European Convention and the Semester of Presidency of the EU», that took place in Padua on 31 January 2003. Five months later the students discussed their proposals with academics and Italian MEPs during a public Conference introduced by an intervention by the Rector of the University of Padova, Professor. Vincenzo Milanesi. The final «substantive contribution» of the workshop, a document of 96 pages, was published entirely on the Forum on the Convention. A brief summary, available in French, English, German, Italian and Spanish, has been distributed to the Convention's members.

¹ Cf. *Laeken Declaration on the Future of the European Union*, p. 3, emphasis added.

2. Studying als beruf

At the end of the academic year the participants of both the working groups considered to have experienced an initiative with added value: the capacity to be constructive and to interact with the University and with the social community. Both workshops used to the same «action-oriented» approach featured in the courses in international studies that are held in Padua. This normative approach directly refers to the Statute of the University of Padova's Article 1.2 which states that «The University of Padova, according to the principles of the Constitution of the Republic of Italy and to its tradition that date back to 1222 and that can be summarised in the motto *Universa Universis Patavina Libertas*, affirms its pluralistic approach and its independency from any conditioning and discrimination of ideological, religious, political or economical origin. The University promotes the elaboration of a culture based on universal values such as human rights, peace, protection of the environment and international solidarity»². Within this «ethical-charged» environment the idea to establish a permanent student workshop on International Politics' issues appeared. Since its beginning, the mandate of the Student Observatory on International Politics *Altiero Spinelli* presented an opportunity to create a «student think-tank» of discussion and action. The association has been dedicated to the memory of Altiero Spinelli, whose works represented a genuine example of prescriptive research. The 37 founding members of the association also thought that the figure of the creator of the «Crocodile club» was particularly fitting: Altiero Spinelli started his political activism at the age of 20, and was later condemned by the Fascist's Special Tribunal for conspiring against the powers of the state³. It was 1927, only 16 years before the famous inaugural lecture of the academic year of the University of Padova in which Rector Concetto Marchesi called the students to fight the Fascism and the Nazis oppression. The University of Padova therefore represents an important tradition with regard to student activism. The situation in the world today encourages the student community to contemplate the reasons for attending University. It is a similar feeling to that Jean Monnet once described: when peace is over, people have to react. Some human rights activists call this sort of behaviour «a

² Unofficial translation.

³ Altiero Spinelli had important contacts with the University of Padova and in 1982 the Faculty of Political Science consigned him a «honoris causa» degree.

humanitarian need», i.e. the need to give a personal contribution to the situation of suffering people which is felt by many young people once they experience social injustices. In my opinion only a minority of western young people is aware of the fact that the international law of human rights offers the instrument for the structural affirmation of a New Order of International Relations as well as for handling emergency situations. I think the paradigm of human rights offers the youth movements the tools for replacing this punctual desire with something more structural. Organisations that are seeking to allow young people to be part of the decision making process can find a strong legitimacy from the international law of human rights. In other words, youth movements could apply themselves to act as human rights defenders that focus their action on the specification of the emerging category of the human rights of young people⁴.

⁴ A host of human rights international instruments incidentally refers to the condition of youth – who are defined by the UN General Assembly as those persons falling between the ages of 15 and 24 years – as well as to the condition of child, such as the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (at artt. 25 and 26), the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (in particular at artt. 10 and 13), the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (at artt. 14, 18 and 23), the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* (at art. 5). The following texts indeed are principally committed to the condition of young people: *GA Declaration on the Promotion among Youth of the Ideals of Peace, Mutual Respect and Understanding between Peoples* (1965); *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1979); *UN Guidelines for Further Planning and Follow-Up in the Field of Youth* (1985); *UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Administration of Juvenile Justice* (The Beijing Rules, 1985); *UN Rules for the Protection of Juveniles Deprived of their Liberty* (1990); *UN Guidelines for the Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency* (The Riyadh Guidelines, 1990); *World Programme of Action for Youth to the Year 2000 and Beyond 1995*; *Braga Youth Action Plan 1998*; *Lisbon Declaration on Youth Policies and Programmes* (1998); the *ILO Convention on the Worst Forms of Child Labour* (1999); *Dakar Youth Empowerment Strategy* (2001).

3. Re-thinking a Project of Participation within the University

The founding members of the Student Observatory initially dedicated their action to the promotion of projects of informal education that could integrate their undergraduate and postgraduate education, according to the provisions of the Statute of the University: its Article 5 calls for the participation of the students in order to fulfil its institutional goals. Article 46 provides the possibility to promote student seminars and initiatives that can contribute to their human and intellectual development. This type of initiatives are not new in Padua: several student associations have oftentimes promoted seminars regarding international affairs that have enriched the global cultural offer of the Faculty of Political Science. However, the interaction between these student formations ended up reflecting the political parties at national level. Furthermore some informal student discussion groups used to approach international affairs in an oversimplified and naive way. The promoters of OSPI-Spinelli realised that few associations in Italy organised activities concerning international affairs clearly referring to the multilateralism or to the principle of the peaceful resolution of international controversies. The founding

members agreed to state in the Statute of the Student Observatory that the association shall promote programmes in the area of international studies through the paradigms of human rights or by using new approaches to international political science, such as human security, human development and global governance. This latter provision was made with the precise aim of conveying the students' will to promote something new. OSPI's founders intended to carry out a cultural work parallel with faculty courses, to attempt to use scientific methodologies, to assure a linkage between education and action as well as the independence from political parties, trade unions, social and civil actors. Despite of this, students were aware of the importance of a constructive dialogue with all these social actors. The Observatory was settled as a Faculty-based organisation, able *de travailler avec* all the components of the University community and social groups. The Statute states that OSPI-Spinelli encourages the «promotion of constructive relations with other Italian Universities, supporting the exchange of experiences and networking with Italian and foreign associations, especially in collaboration with students who are taking part in the Socrates-Erasmus programme». Regarding the fields of thematic interests, the association's Statute unfolds a special focus on four principal areas: the protection and the promotion of human rights; the role of the United Nations regarding the promotion of international peace and security, the disarmament and international co-operation; the process of European integration, the European identity, and the promotion of an active citizenship. The foundation of the association also represented an opportunity for students of social sciences to experience the issues affecting the concrete management of an NGO; since the founders have the possibility to design their own project of association, they tried to put into practice their theoretical knowledge: the Statute defines OSPI-Spinelli as a community which accentuates attributes such as adhesion to shared values and horizontal decision-taking processes rather than numerical membership or financial assets.

4. Our Action Plan and the Concept of Instrumental Egoism

Defining the annual plan of activities, the Board of the association seeks to schedule initiatives which comply with two requirements: representing a contribution to the intellectual and human development of the participants and being finalised for reaching an external outcome.

Some projects mainly reflect the first requirement; these are for instance the Caucus on International Politics – an English language weekly group of discussion – and participation at conferences in Italy («Assembly of the UNs Peoples», Perugia) and Europe («Alpe Adria Youth Conference», Novo Mesto, Slovenia). Communication related issues received particular attention in the definition of the association's mission: since the beginning of its activity the Observatory launched the website www.ospi-spinelli.it where the students' contributions are published either in the newsletter «Club della San Francesco» or in the thematic sections of the online forum. The association also produced the radio-programme *Peace Signals*. These activities respond in particular to the need of thinking globally while acting locally. The Observatory also prioritises the promotion information-sharing among its members regarding for example internship opportunities and interesting post-graduate programmes. Thanks to the establishment of a collaboration with a local Eurodesk centre, OSPI's website publishes information concerning mobility projects of the «Youth» European programme on a daily basis.

The Student Observatory also organises the Padua Model United Nations. OSPI co-operates with Faculty courses on International Relations, Political System of the EU and Protection of Human Rights for the promotion of a series of simulations of the multilateral negotiations which take place in three distinct international bodies: the UN Security Council, the Intergovernmental Conference of the EU member states and the Human Rights Committee (International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights). Participants undertake the role of the states' delegates (or the observers'/NGOs delegates) and convene in order to deal with some arranged topics, for example: the Israel and the Palestine conflict, the revision of the Draft-treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe and the

discussion of the Italian report on the implementation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Each participant has to simulate the conduct of its state/observer/NGO using the original rules of procedures. At the same time delegates have to carry out their position «in the national capacity», being coherent with the paradigm of human rights. PAMUN's main objective is to provide food for thought regarding the handling of similar issues with advanced approaches, rather than organise a «wanna be diplomats» play. The previous edition of PAMUN has obtained the patronage of the Centre of Information of the United Nations in Rome and five representatives of PAMUN joined the Vienna Model United Nations in August 2004, one of the most international recognised UN youth model.

2004 has also been the year of the establishment of a formal collaboration with the Human Rights and Peace Office of the Municipality of Padua: OSPI-Spinelli assisted the Municipality in carrying out «The New Europe» project. During the international seminar «Reclaim Our UN», hosted by the Municipality of Padua and the local University in November 2004, the Altiero Spinelli Observatory produced an exposition on the history of the UN.

5. Fostering the Youth Side of Governance

Let's now consider the possibility of a student association such as OSPI-Spinelli setting its action within a global strategy of empowerment of young people performed by several international organisations. It seems to me that the project of OSPI-Spinelli could give a substantive contribution to the national implementation of such a philosophy. Nowadays policy-makers rarely disagree in considering young people as a strategic resource. The will to promote the full inclusion of new generations represents an emerging dimension of multi-level governance. Political authorities and institutions are increasingly developing new instruments of participation, in particular in order to confront legitimisation and consensus questions. Various international organisations have gained significant experience in youth policies, notably after the adoption in 1995 of the *World Programme of Action for Youth to*

the Year 2000 and Beyond by the UN General Assembly. It seems to me that this emerging sensitivity is generating a complex demand of young individuals learning international skills and of youth NGOs adequately equipped with regard to the expertise of their leadership.

Let's have an overview of the *acquis* in the field of international youth policies. Since the Council of Ministers' Declaration of 12 January 1971, the Council of Europe features a co-management mechanism which includes the participation of youth entities: the decision-making structures of the CoE contain representatives of youth organisations that work together with government representatives in order to decide on the sectoral policies before submission to the Committee of Ministers. The Council of Europe has been a pioneer-organisation in the foundation of youth programmes aimed at the development of a common European cultural area and identity: these activities are still managed by a structure called Directorate General of Education, Culture and Heritage, Youth and Sport. The priorities of the youth sector for 2003-2005 are on youth promoting human rights and social cohesion, youth participation and democratic citizenship, youth building peace and intercultural dialogue, youth policy development and research. The *European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life* – adopted by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe of the Council of Europe in May 2003⁵ – refers to permanent or non-permanent youth councils, youth parliaments and youth *fora* as important means for the consultation of young people. The functions of these elected bodies range from providing youth view in sectoral subjects (education, cultural policies, international mobility, job searching...) to giving opinions on general matters. Another method for the promotion of young people's consultation is represented by the organisation of permanent *fora* of youth NGOs: the same Charter makes reference to the necessity from the Council of Europe's point of view for the existence in all member states of a «cobweb» of youth organisations. The European Union shares a similar language. In November 2001, the European Commission stated that the decision to publish the white paper *A New Impetus for European Youth*⁶ and to conduct wide-ranging consultations beforehand was «rooted primarily in the desire to promote new forms of European

⁵ Cf. *European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life*, appendix to Recommendation 128.

⁶ Cf. European Commission, *A New Impetus for European Youth*, Brussels, 21.11.2001, COM(2001) 681, final.

governance». A decision of the European Parliament and of the Council⁷ establishes «Youth», the EU's ambitious mobility and non-formal education programme targeting young people aged between 15 and 25 years. At the European Union level the absence of forms of co-management and of a permanent youth council is compensated by other positive experiences, such as the influence of the platform of youth NGOs «Youth forum jeunesse». A recent European Parliament and Council decision establishes a community action programme to promote bodies active at European level in the field of youth⁸. Furthermore, at the European Union level young people coming from different political contexts often demonstrated the capacity to agree on values and strategies. For instance, the Young European Federalists, the Young European Socialists, the Young Liberals and Democrats for Europe and the Young of the European People's Party submitted a common contribution to the Forum of the Convention on the Future of Europe, in which they advocated the necessity of a European federation and of a genuine supra-national government, responsible *vis-à-vis* the Parliament. Lastly, the Division for Social Policy and Development of the UN Department for Economic and Social Affairs promotes the «Youth» programme, which is drawn from the *World Programme of Action for Youth to the Year 2000 and Beyond*. It aims to «enhance awareness of the global situation of youth and increase recognition of the rights and aspirations of youth; promote national youth policies, national youth co-ordinating mechanisms and national youth programmes of action as integral parts of social and economic development, in co-operation with both governmental and non-governmental organisations; and strengthen the participation of youth in decision-making processes at all levels in order to increase their impact on national development and international co-operation».

6. Conclusions

The tendencies discussed in this essay demonstrate the increased attention placed on the condition of young people as a changing group. Young people are acquiring autonomous status later and later in life. Although they are under-represented within all

⁷ Cf. Decision no. 1031/2000/EC of 13 April 2000.

⁸ Cf. Decision no 790/2004/EC of the 21st April 2004, Official Journal L 138, 30/04/2004.

levels of decision-making bodies, young people express their desire to become pro-active actors of human progress, through their involvement in institutional or non-institutional bodies. Joining a «Youth Parliament» as well as a youth association could constitute a significant educational opportunity. Nonetheless, it seems to me that these experiences should emphasise the consultative dimension rather than pedagogical concerns. At the same time University programmes should privilege a more action-oriented approach. The experience of the Student Observatory on International Politics – that benefited from the inputs from the Faculty of Political Science – proves that the University still constitutes a vital environment for raising awareness. During the two years of activity, most of its members gained the experiences and the motivation that lead to a new involvement in specialised NGOs or in other training programmes. In other words, our association has helped a significant number of young people to enjoy experiences that seemed to be far beyond their reach. That is to say that we experimented a way to link our student role to the tradition of the University of Padova and to open our studies to the real world.