

---

## Book Review

### **Maria T. Grasso (2016) *Generations, Political participation and Social Change in Western Europe*. London; New York: Routledge. 255 pages.**

Writing about popular phenomena in social science is important, but it can be a tricky issue for an author. On the one hand it is often difficult to offer a new, innovative perspective, which would contribute to the existing body of knowledge, while taking into account relevant standpoints, theories, approaches and interpretations, and all that under the close scrutiny of fellow academics. Authors who write about contemporary buzz topics are applauded yet closely monitored by the public. Maria T. Grasso has certainly avoided these traps with her book *Generations, Political participation and Social Change in Western Europe* and, despite the proliferation of papers on the same topic, has written a remarkable, comprehensive and intelligible analysis of one of the most important aspects of youth studies – political participation. Even though the topic of youth participation has been examined from various points of view, with this book Grasso managed to find a niche within political participation studies that needed to be filled, and she has brought new relevant insights into it.

The study of political participation is one of the most propulsive topics in contemporary political science. Scholars are conceptualizing it, measuring it, comparing it, defining it and operationalizing it, all in order to understand its relevance for democracy and consequently for society as a whole. Political participation studies are so omnipresent and multifaceted that, as Van Deth (2001) claims, they have become ‘the study of everything’. The same goes for youth political participation. Modern-day European youth policy, summarized as the EU Youth Strategy, devotes considerable attention to the development of active citizens as one way to decrease the democratic deficit the EU is faced with. However, the idea of youth participation goes beyond EU policies, because as scholars believe, it has a beneficial role in empowering young people and creating an enabling environment for their active role in society and polity. Political participation of young people is not only a policy measure, but is also a pedagogical tool for youth development, thus it should be seen as that, too. Numerous texts written by political scientists, sociologists and policy experts on this matter distinguish political from social participation, talk about the role of education, gender, resident status or social class in determining the level of participation, or explain the difference between conventional and unconventional forms of participation. Despite their number, there are very few texts that manage to comprehend theoretical standpoints and empirical data in a coherent text, however the book *Generations, Political participation and Social Change in Western Europe* succeeds to offer a logically coherent, intellectually profound, and academically relevant story on political participation in 10 Western European countries, seen through the prism of generations.

In a 255-pages-long book published by Routledge, Maria T. Grasso seeks to answer the question whether there are reasons to be concerned about the future of democratic politics. As the author writes in the introduction, it is often being heard

---

that younger generations are disengaged from politics, that they prefer unconventional political participation over conventional politics and that the political behaviour of the youth of today is completely different from that of their parents' generation. Maria T. Grasso in her text critically examines these claims and presents her conclusions based on methodologically rigorous empirical research by putting them into the relevant social and political context. This book, despite its title, is not only about political participation of young people, but is about much more. It is about the future of democracy and the change contemporary society brings in. Maria T. Grasso starts her book with the claim that at the end of the twenty-first century, western publics have become the objects, rather than the subjects of history, and after reading this volume I believe there is no better sentence to start it with.

Generations, Political participation and Social Change in Western Europe consists of eight chapters and a relatively long appendix where the author presents methodological remarks and offers additional data on the topic of this book. In general, each chapter follows logically from the previous one, while also making a specific contribution to the overall argument. It can be said that Maria Grasso succeeded to create a lucid and rich story on different aspects of youth political participation taking into consideration variations depending on countries' specific contexts. Chapter one focusses on political participation as a multi-dimensional concept. Here the author presents a comprehensive literature review of various political scientists and political sociologists on the topic of political participation in order to draw out the key themes relevant for the upcoming empirical analysis. In chapter two the concepts of generations and social change are analysed. The largest part of the chapter is devoted to a discussion of the concept of generation and the characteristics each generation has. Special attention is put on formative years and the generational differences based on them. Maria Grasso in her analysis distinguishes five generations (the pre-WWII, the post-WWII, the baby-boomers, the '80s generation and the '90s generation) for each of which she claims that there are distinctive characteristics and *modi operandi*. After putting the stress on the importance of socialization and political context and their implication for participation patterns of different cohorts, in the fourth chapter, The evolution of political participation in Western Europe, Grasso focusses on the patterns of popular political involvement in Western Europe. Here institutional ways of participation such as turnout, party membership, union membership, as well as unconventional ones (for example attending a demonstration, joining a boycott, signing a petition, and participation in social movement organization) are examined. Grasso in her analysis uses cross-national survey data from large-N comparative research, namely the World Value Study/European Value Study and the European Social Survey focussing on the period 1981-2006. The author argues that this frame allows her to assess the extent of changes in the political participation patterns without including confounding factors and in order to analyse generational change by allowing the youngest generation to have 'come of age'. Chapters five and six cover formal and informal political participation in Western Europe. There are several important notions of conventional political participation that Grasso points out of which we present three. First, it is a misconception that younger cohorts are less likely than older cohorts to engage in all types of conventional political activities. Second, political contexts as well as education,

are important variables for explaining formal participation. And third, the idea that modernization leads younger cohorts to disengage from 'elite/directed' political activities is not supported by evidence. When it comes to unconventional political participation, the argument that all the younger cohorts should be engaging in elite-changing activities more than older cohorts is not universally correct. Findings about class inequalities are particularly interesting, hence Grasso concludes that countries with strong social-democratic and/or left-wing traditions are weak in these categories. The book confirms that those identifying as left-wing are more likely to engage in unconventional political activities while those who identify as right-wing prefer conventional participation. In addition, the book shows that there are remarkable differences between the 10 observed countries in relation to both conventional and unconventional participation. Chapter seven is in fact a discussion where the author confirms that formative experience matters and illustrates that on the example of baby-boomers or 'the protest' generation'. The last chapter of the book deals with the future of political participation. Grasso claims that the evidence presented in this book shows that while conventional participation is set to continue to decline in the future, unconventional participation cannot make up for this loss in democratic capability. This is perhaps the most important finding in the book because it summarizes the most relevant issues in contemporary democratic theory; how to make democracy more democratic when its distinctive characteristic is becoming less and less appealing to people.

In the light of all this, there is no doubt that the book *Generations, Political participation and Social Change in Western Europe* is a truly exceptional and original academic text. It carefully combines theoretical insights and rigorous empirical analysis to demonstrate all facets of political participation in the context of generations. Maria Grasso has definitely set a new standard both in youth and political studies with this comparative analysis due to its sophisticated and yet convincing argumentation line. Easy to read and rich in data, this book is an excellent source of information for academics, students and all those who are interested in political participation, youth and social change.

**Marko Kovacic** ([marko@idi.hr](mailto:marko@idi.hr))  
Institute for Social Research, Croatia

## *References*

- van Deth, J. W. (2001) *Studying Political Participation: Towards a Theory of Everything?* Paper presented at the "Electronic Democracy: Mobilisation, Organisation and Participation via new ICTs" workshop. European Consortium for Political Research. April 6-11, Grenoble.