



Brief description

This case concerns two groups that overlap both in terms of the composition of the group and the kind of activities developed. One concerns the Manchester branch of a socialist party, where most of the members are young people, due partly to the high student population of the city. The socialist students, on the other hand, are the student wing of a socialist party, and its activities are developed within the Students' Unions of two of universities. The group meets every week to discuss contemporary political issues and historical events, against the background of Marxian theory. In the words of former chair of the group the point of the group is to "have a group discussion, having good theory", making this group "based on theory": "we like to talk about Marxist history theory"; as well as current issues such as the refugee crisis, the American elections, Brexit, the Prevent Agenda, the National Student Survey, etc. The group is also engaged in political activism, by organising and participating in public protests and events (e.g. against austerity, against sexual harassment), as well as supporting working class initiatives (e.g., the strikes in NHS).

What we have learned about participation

Orthodoxy and stabilising connections

The willingness to work together with other groups of society, even if there are core disagreements concerning basic political positions, is considered crucial for the dynamics of the group. This might contrast with a certain idea of closure and orthodoxy that accompanies Marxist oriented groups. However, in the words of Michel "*it will be pointless working only with people that agree with you, because you don't reach out to everyone*". Michel criticises the idea of "safe-spaces", as being too much focused on "looking inwards", "*when in fact you have to look at the rest of the society and try to get people involved in your ideas and get your ideas out to people that disagree with you*" (Michel). There is however a preoccupation in not watering down the main principles of the group (idem).

Political activism and political awareness

One of the features that stands out in this group is how they articulate activism with great theoretical awareness. All the discussions are highly debated.

The participants are highly politicised and theoretically informed. The meetings, both of the Socialist Students and of the Socialist Party, are considered by its members to be informal educational spaces, where they can learn and discuss theories and positions that are often absent from formal education. Michel, in particular, is clear on how the Socialist Students provided him with an alternative learning space, different from the university one. This seems to heighten a lot in Michel's first engagement with the group. "*I felt it was a second education for me. You have one side of the learning at university, and then you are learning all these other things, and I think it is important to educate people on these ideas, the revolutionary ideas that you don't hear about*" (Michel). He mentions the space as an opportunity to share challenging ideas in an accessible way. It is also a space of conflict, of being confronted with different ideas and having to develop strong understandings and argumentations to defend your ideas.

Key Challenges Identified

A common impression among the members of both groups concerns the feeling amongst the general population that nothing can be done, nothing can change, all is determined: "*that idea that you cannot change the structures of society*" (Michel). This pessimism of the overall population is seen as a barrier to change. Another barrier concerns the attitude that some adults have towards young people, where these are seen as being naïve and highly idealistic. On the other hand, the stigmatisation of party politics that many young people seem to carry can be seen as a challenge towards youth political engagement. Finally we identified a set of challenges in the relation between young people and the student unions that represent them. In the words of Anabel, the unions can be very apolitical, "*and consciously tries to maintain neutrality on political issues*". She complains about the Union not being interested in engaging students in their activities, and of being very bureaucratic, and "*there isn't actually any democratic structures for students to get involved to decide on policies*".