Carla Malafaia,Eeva Luhtakallio,Isabel Menezes, Neves Tiago

Being civic while disavowing politics: an ethnography of a youth NGO in Portugal

Abstract

Civic and political participation are the vehicles through which citizens of democratic societies engage in the public sphere, identify and address matters of public concern, and monitor governments' activities. While the civic and the political are often regarded as two sides of the same coin, that assertion deserves questioning in times of an expanding voluntary sector and shrinking participation in institutional and electoral politics. Based on an ethnographic study in a large volunteer organization in the north of Portugal, we discuss the complexities of participation, namely whether it is possible to be civic without being political. In this article, we show how an emphasis in caring for the other and promoting volunteers' personal development coexists with indifference regarding political issues, and how high levels of motivation and engagement concur with resolving (or smothering) conflict through a strong investment in affective bonds, rather than open discussion. Finally, we examine the role of religion in creating collective identity and simultaneously legitimizing a depoliticized approach to social intervention, thus exploring the paradoxes and limitations that may lay in wishing to change the world without engaging in politics.

Keywords

Civic engagement, political participation, voluntary organizations, youth, Portugal

Introduction

Civic engagement and civil society groups have traditionally been identified as the backbone of healthy democracies (Morales and Geurts, 2007), as they 'instil in their members habits of cooperation and public-spiritedness' (Putnam, 2000: 338). Such groups enable people to learn how to address problems collectively, and to self-organize to improve common life (Durkheim, 1957). This traditional view, while continuously reinforced in civil society research, has nonetheless been criticized for excessive optimism. One of the most prominent critiques in recent scholarship, Nina Eliasoph (2013), has examined the role of civic engagement in the context of empowerment projects: the trend in which the civil society is seen to offer remedy for all kinds of societal ills. She has suggested that voluntary associations can teach their members 'to care about the world and talk about their political concerns; but they can also teach members how not to care and to silence these concerns' (2001: 39). Eliasoph's work unfolds the inconsistencies in volunteer organizations that aim at fostering community empowerment and yet end up undermining it due to a lack of clear (political) commitment and organization. She is not alone: the puzzles of civil society's role in contexts of crumbling welfare services have been addressed recurrently in recent years (Eikenberry and Kluve, 2004; Milbourne and Cushman, 2015; Siisiäinen et al., 2015). Studies have shown that young generations increasingly withdraw from institutional arenas of political socialization and participation, in particular voting (Putnam, 2000, 2007; Benedicto and Morán, 2002; Norris, 2002; Zukin et al., 2006; Harris et al., 2010). Yet, alternative means of participation and voluntarism are shown to gain increasing support (Beck, 2000; Norris, 2002; Kemmers et al., 2016). The reasons behind the decline of one type and the increase of another type of participation remain, at least in part, elusive.

Much of the above body of scholarship analyses civic engagement either in an Anglo-American or Northern European contexts. In the light of recent years' developments – financial crisis, politics of austerity and massive youth unemployment and, as a response, the *Occupy* and

Indignados type movements – the question of civic engagement and politics is most likely subjected to differentiation among European democracies. Also, the role of religion has been scarcely addressed in most previous studies, while in the Catholic Southern Europe it has a potentially strong role also among young people. The immediate societal conditions of young people's experiences affecting their participation deserve being better taken into account. In this article, we begin to fill the existing gap by analyzing current youth civic engagement in Portugal, one of the hardest-hit by austerity politics of Southern European states. We do this through an ethnographic study of a large Portuguese NGO, analyzed from the perspective of the young volunteers' experiences of participation. Our analysis sheds new light on the variation of civic and political engagements, and examines whether and how habits of cooperation, self-organization and work for the public good may co-exist with a clear reluctance to political commitment. Ultimately, the question is if and how civic participation can survive depoliticization (see Luhtakallio, 2012), and what kind of "civic imagination" – that is, the creative and intentional ways in which people imagine and establish new collective futures (Baiocchi et al., 2014) – drives a given setting and its young participants.

Youth participation and the quality of participation experiences

In Portugal, following international trends, young people have progressively disengaged from institutional politics and voting (e.g., Magalhães and Moral, 2008; Menezes et al., 2012; García-Albacete, 2014). Simultaneously, they are increasingly active in civic groups (e.g., Magalhães and Moral, 2008) – namely volunteer organizations. Studies have shown that volunteer organizations promote high quality participation experiences as they offer conditions for political development (Ferreira, 2006; Heitor, 2011). Seemingly, Portugal presents some features diverging from international trends. While the deinstitutionalization of youth participation and

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young people's disengagement from voting is clear (Magalhães and Moral, 2008; Menezes et al., 2012; García-Albacete, 2014), the levels of volunteering in particular are relatively high, especially among young adults, who also exhibit high levels of political interest and attentiveness (Magalhães and Moral, 2008; Fernandes-Jesus, 2015).[1]

We define civic engagement, following Zukin et al. (2006) as involvement in the community to address its needs and goals 'through direct hands-on work in cooperation with others'; which 'normally occurs within nongovernmental organizations and rarely touches upon electoral politics' (ibid. 51). Thus, civic engagement (in communities, churches or other organizations) 'can be highly political, entirely nonpolitical, and anything in between' (Fiorina, 2001: 5). Therefore, engagement *per se* is not necessarily 'enough' or 'good', as it can amount to nothing but individual-centered and short-term involvement and possibly even lead to the instrumentalization of civic groups by elites, and to an over-representation of 'extreme voices' (Fiorina, 1999). In Portugal, several studies have shown that volunteer organizations promote *quality participation* experiences as they offer conditions for political development (Ferreira, 2006; Heitor, 2011). By looking closely at the experience of volunteering and the notion of quality, we want to contribute to the scholarly calls for considering more than mere 'head-counting' in

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[1] Compared with other Western democracies, the overall levels of civic engagement in Portugal are low (except for religious associations). However, Portuguese young people present higher levels of civic engagement and participatory dispositions than the rest of active population (Magalhães and Moral, 2008). Also, in Western Europe, Portugal is the only country where no significant difference exists in political interest between young people and adults and where young people trust other people more, pay more attention to news and hold higher levels of postmaterialist values (García-Albacete, 2014). Thus, if recent USA generations appear to be losing connection to the community and interest in regular, long-term commitments (Jennings and Stoker, 2004), in other Western societies civic engagement and social capital may be undergoing different changes (Norris, 2002), and a significant decrease in institutional participation may mean that young people are intentionally turning away from institutional politics towards either community (or global) concerns.

analyzing civic engagement (e.g., Putnam, 2000; Eliasoph, 2013; Theiss-Morse and Hibbing, 2005; Menezes et al., 2012).

Our starting point for the ethnographic study presented here was the results from a quantitative study in which volunteer organizations were reported as offering meaningful, high quality participation experiences together with opportunities to reflect about them, thus promoting plurality, integration of conflict in supportive environments, and long-term engagement. This survey was part of a research strand focused on the quality of participation in several participatory settings in Portugal (e.g., Ferreira, 2006; Azevedo, 2009; Veiga, 2008; Fernandes-Jesus, 2015). In this vein, Ferreira et al. (2012) argue that some 'civic and political experiences might […] present the variety of developmental conditions, and interaction quality [which is] key to understand[ing] the transformational potential of experiences' (Ferreira et al., 2012: 601). This claim is based on the notions of classical theorists of psychological and educational development who explored the relevance of contact with plural perspectives, the integration of conflicts and meaningful action, namely through role-taking experiences and reflection in supportive, yet challenging, contexts (e.g. Dewey, 1916; Kohlberg, 1976; Zimmerman, 1995). Therefore, Ferreira et al. (2012: 601) argue that 'getting involved in political parties, unions, social movements, volunteer work in the community, religious or recreational associations (…) may have the high quality social interaction features that (…) prompt development in both cognitive and attitudinal domains'. They also integrate contributions from political philosophers such as Arendt (2001), who states that politics emerges from interaction between equals who are inevitably different. Psychological approaches acknowledge that cognitive conflict arising from interaction with different others leads to adjustments crucial to psychological development (e.g., Brown et al., 2000). Theiss-Morse and Hibbing (2005: 227), in a literature review of participation in civic groups, emphasize that democratic practices should occur in heterogeneous groups capable of

integrating conflict, and that "citizens need to learn that democracy is messy, inefficient and conflict-ridden". The productive value of conflict, then, is a dimension of the quality of participation experiences.

Ferreira and Menezes (2001) developed an instrument to capture dimensions related to the actions performed by citizens in civic and political settings, their reflection about them, the relational quality of those settings (whether they offer opportunities to interact with different perspectives in a supportive environment or not) and the constancy of participation. The Participation Experiences Questionnaire (QEP) assesses the quality of participation in civic and political experiences. High quality experiences are seen as those with a transformative potential in terms of personal development, which may in turn stimulate collective change. This instrument has been validated in several studies with adults and young people in Portugal (from national and migrant origins), showing that high quality experiences favor more complex levels of thinking about politics (Ferreira, 2006), psychological empowerment (Veiga, 2008), dispositions to future involvement (Azevedo, 2009), and internal political efficacy (Fernandes-Jesus, 2015). Ferreira (2006) shows that high-quality experiences are related with more complex and integrated ways of thinking and acting politically, while Heitor (2011), through a qualitative approach, concludes that volunteering experiences of higher education students favor their psychological empowerment and the development of social networks. These studies also show that, in most cases, no participation at all can be better than low quality participation in terms of political development. The ethnographic research presented here builds on a study that involved the use of QEP and made us decide taking a closer look at voluntary organizations (see the *Methods* section).

Volunteering in Portugal

Volunteering in Portugal is historically rooted in the Catholic Church (Catarino, 2004; Franco, 2005). This heritage, together with the mutualist tradition and the recent democratic transition, is crucial to make sense of the Portuguese non-profit sector (Marques, 2011). Indeed, the principles of subsidiarity and common-good, participation and solidarity, together with the values of the Catholic Church's Social Doctrine, impact both the legal framing and the common understanding of what volunteering should be (Marques, 2011). Despite the separation between the Church and the State since the XIX century, the prominence of religion was consecrated both in the Constitutions of 1933 (promulgated early into Salazar's authoritarian regime) and 1976 (the democratic Constitution promulgated after the Carnations' Revolution of 1974).

Additionally, in Portugal, religious belief and church belonging are significant predictors of participation both in religious and non-religious volunteering organizations (Catarino, 2004). The influence of Catholicism helps explaining the association between volunteering and social care (Abreu, 2008), even more so considering that Portugal, alike other Southern European countries, is characterized by an underdeveloped Welfare State and thus pressure and threat to the autonomy of voluntary organizations (Ferrera, 1999; Reis 2010). It should be noted that, in religious organizations, participation is associated with higher levels of social integration (Ultee et al., 2003), as religiosity tends to encourage voluntary work (Ruiter and De Graaf, 2006) and proximity with mobilization networks (Klandermans, 1984).

Also, Portugal is one of the so-called developed countries with the steepest income gaps, surpassed only by the USA (Wilkinson and Picket, 2009). The unemployment rate's rise from

9.4% to 13.9% between 2009 and 2014 (peaking at 16.2% in 2013), and simultaneous, drastic

cuts in social benefits[2] provide an illustration of the severity of the recent crisis in Portugal.[3]

A Report characterizing volunteering in Portugal (Romão et al., 2012) claims there are

600.000 volunteers in Portugal, 60% of them engaged on a regular basis, with an increase in

young volunteers. In Non-governmental organizations for development (NGODs), like the one we

chose for this study, volunteers are mostly young, female, and have high academic qualifications

(Romão et al., 2012). The main motivations for volunteering reported are, broadly speaking, the

'defense of the common-good and of the solidarity principles' (Romão et al., 2012: 54). Despite a

strong reliance on public funding and the influence of religion, voluntary work in Portugal has

become increasingly professionalized (Franco, 2005), and focused on effectiveness (Machin and

Paine, 2008).

Methods and context of study

The analysis we present below was initiated after a quantitative study based on the Participation

Experiences Questionnaire (QEP).[4] The respondents were 1107 Portuguese students from

private and public schools and Universities, located in rural and urban areas. The group identified

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[2] Resulting e.g. in the decrease of beneficiaries of Guaranteed Minimum Income by over 150.000.
[3] Another telling consequence of the recent austerity measures is that between 2011 and 2014 nearly 500.000 people emigrated from Portugal (a country of roughly 10 million), about 200.000 of them permanently.
[4] The QEP is a self-report measure that starts by asking about respondents' participation in political parties, social movements, groups of volunteering, religious organizations, etc., and the duration thereof. The respondents rate their degree of involvement in the experience considered the most meaningful. The respondents are then asked to consider the opportunities for action and reflection the latter offers. Quality of Participation Experiences result from a clustering procedure that classifies participants into groups that integrate both the action and reflection dimensions of the participation experience. Multiple cluster analyses are employed to classify participation on the basis of similarity derived from the scores of QEP subscales (action and reflection). The final variable has three groups: low quality of participation (low scores on action and reflection), medium quality of participation and high quality.

in the survey as "high quality participation" was cross-tabulated with the contexts where young respondents had been participating for at least 6 months. Voluntary organizations, namely charity groups and human rights organizations, scored 56.7% and 86.2%, respectively, as contexts of high quality of participation experiences.

We then conducted an ethnographic study to address questions that survey data leaves unanswered: what actually happens in the participatory settings identified by the youth as personally more meaningful? How do the civic and the political articulate in a context of high quality participation? Ethnographic fieldwork was chosen to generate in-depth understanding about these groups and settings (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). We selected an NGO in Porto as the field site, not only because it is one of the biggest in the region, but also because of its reputation in social intervention and in successfully recruiting young members. The main fieldwork period lasted from October 2015 to March 2016. It included weekly voluntary work, fortnightly meetings and weekend activities. In this paper we name this organization TOGod, to allude to the collective bonds it advocates (its motto is 'We are Together') and to its religious undertones, even if officially it is not a religious organization.

TOGod has 400 volunteers and this figure increases annually. It is divided into two groups: youths and adults. The ethnographer joined the youth group (members aged between 18-26 years old), which has almost 200 volunteers. TOGod's self-reported mission is human development, and it carries out several national and international volunteering projects with vulnerable populations. The national projects in Portugal are aimed at the homeless, the elderly, institutionalized young people, disadvantaged children, and mentally disabled people. The organization's funding depends principally on its own fundraising activities, including professionally organized gala dinners, offertories, barbecues, concerts, theatre plays, solidary

walks, fairs, etc. Occasionally, private companies fund specific projects, as the private sector is increasingly pressed to take on social responsibilities.

To carry out this study, the ethnographer got an authorization from the board of the NGO. The requirement was to behave as a regular volunteer for at least one year: attend the initial meetings (in which the mission, aims and projects were presented), enroll in a project (to do volunteering on a weekly basis) and participate in all activities (fortnightly meetings and weekend activities). This sought to avoid causing disruption in TOGod's operations. The ethnographer was allocated to one of the institutions working with mentally disabled people. This specific volunteering project, likewise most TOGod's projects, is based on years of cooperation with a local social institution. It needs to be highlighted that these kinds of institutions struggle with financial and human resources difficulties. Therefore, they typically welcome volunteer assistance, especially stable and qualified one – as in TOGod's case. Indeed, in the first meeting attended by the ethnographer, the director of the institution for mentally disabled people expressed his gratitude for the volunteers' assistance.

We chose TOGod because it is quite representative of the Portuguese volunteering scenario (Romão et al., 2012; Serapioni et al., 2013): most volunteers are women, middle-class, typically university students, some just recently graduated. TOGod's mission is to be 'a school of life' focused on assistance and development, contributing to 'a better world, with less needs' (TOGod´s website). It is strongly related to social care and has relevant connections with the Catholic Church, although it is neither a religious organization nor formally affiliated to the Church. In any case, most of TOGod's projects run in partnership with secular institutions. During the fieldwork, the ethnographer interacted with about 30 volunteers in total, more regularly with 7 women and 3 men. The average age of this group was 23. These volunteers were aware of the ethnographer's researcher role.

***Practices of volunteering:* serving the other**

The beneficiaries of the institution for mentally disabled people are occupied by carrying out simple tasks paid for by local private companies (e.g. making clothes' pegs). The volunteers assist them in their tasks, simultaneously chatting with the beneficiaries about the singers they like, TV shows they watched, something that upset them, or questions they pose about the volunteers' own lives. The beneficiaries seem thankful of the volunteers being there, often hugging them or asking, every week, when will they return (some of the beneficiaries don't have an accurate notion of the time). Additionally, the volunteers organize events for the beneficiaries outside their institutions. For example, for the mentally disabled group, TOGod organized a Christmas party, held in a Faculty building (with a Students' Association support to TOGod). Sometimes, the institutions, as a way of thanking TOGod, contribute to its fundraising activities (e.g., by making cakes for sale).

The ethnographer did voluntary work every Thursday morning together with Xana, another volunteer at TOGod. Xana was more experienced, as TOGod always pairs up new volunteers with experienced ones. Xana's experience translated into effectiveness: she always arrived first at the institution, greeting everyone, even the most mistrustful and wary beneficiaries, asking them what they were doing. She continuously strove to interact with everyone, including those with whom interaction was difficult – the less friendly and more mistrustful, the more aggressive and the ones with severe mental disabilities. In their turn, they seemed receptive to Xana's approach, smiling and often wanting to be near her.

Besides weekly volunteering, TOGod organizes activities such as the "work weekend", in which all volunteers travelled to a small Northern village and were lodged for 3 days in a foster care institution for children. During these days, they assisted the children and the elderly from

nearby nursing homes. At the start of the journey, a volunteer (member of the direction board) stated:

> This will be a magic weekend which will fill our hearts. This is an opportunity for younger volunteers to experience our way of being, collectively, in the service of others. (Marta, January 29th)

For the work weekend, volunteers organized into small groups to undertake the activities with the children and the elderly as planned by the direction board (composed, in yearly rotation, by more experienced volunteers). These groups were organized into shifts so as to attend to both the children and the elderly throughout the weekend. After each shift was completed, the members of the board called the volunteers for short briefings. A spokesperson for each of the groups reported what they had done with the beneficiaries, so as to avoid repeating activities in the following shifts. The elderly in the nursing homes looked quite grave at the start, but when the volunteers approached them and interactions began, their expressions changed. Later, several were laughing and chatting continuously, sharing stories about their past and their family. Others joined the activities proposed by the volunteers, playing traditional games, dancing and laughing. In the end, they thanked volunteers for coming by. Although the more experienced volunteers had prepared many materials to implement a range of activities (songs, games, etc.), they were comfortable doing whatever the beneficiaries wished, trying to understand how they could benefit from their presence. For these volunteers, this is what "serving the other" – a recurrent expression in TOGod – seemed to mean: the ability to listen, and the flexibility to adjust.

In the foster care institution, where volunteers spent most of the weekend, many children knew older volunteers from previous years. In the first day, the volunteers either assisted children in their homework or played the games they wanted. The second day was pretty much focused on

the preparation of a big party, like a TV show, where children performed playlets, songs and dances. Each performance was prepared jointly by groups of children and volunteers: this meant exchanging ideas, creating props and rehearsing (the volunteers alone crafted the sceneries). Afterwards, the farewell moment was very emotional, with several children hugging the volunteers, crying, not wanting to let them go.

In the meeting prior to the work weekend, the board emphasized its importance in familiarizing new volunteers with TOGod's way of doing volunteering, and its importance to the children; volunteers were shown a slideshow that said that 'every year they [the children] wait for this visit, for them it is their Christmas (…) you will make their best weekend happen' (January, 20th). Surely, both the elderly and the children seemed to enjoy the weekend. And yet, from our analytical viewpoint, while certainly emphasizing the nurture and display of affections, this type of work will hardly contribute to changing the structural situation of the beneficiaries. To be sure, this raises questions regarding the nature and goals of volunteering. We will explore these issues in the following section, namely by seeking to understand the drivers of TOGod's work, how it engages volunteers and promotes their sustained involvement; in sum, how participation in TOGod is experienced by the volunteers.

Culture inculcation: **practicing care and the exercise of contemplation**

After leaving the institution on a Thursday morning, the ethnographer tells Xana that she will be unable to go to next week's meeting because of a professional appointment. The ethnographer added that TOGod is fairly demanding in terms of time commitment, intentionally addressing how volunteers deal with this:

Sometimes I can't go to meetings either. And there are some people that almost never go. There are people that I remember from the first meetings and then they just evaporate… Every year is the same thing – Xana said. [She then adds that such people] can do volunteering in another organization, because TOGod is much more than that. It is not just going out and doing volunteering. TOGod' spirit is much more than that! (…) [our strong] relationships are created in moments such as the work and reflection weekends! Those activities are fundamental! (January 28th)

In this section we will try to grasp this 'spirit', grounded on *bonds* between volunteers and a continuous work of *reflection*. Both aspects are instrumental in conveying a particular way of being a volunteer.

The fact that experienced volunteers are paired with novices reveals an organizational dimension of TOGod: promoting learning through example and creating a secure environment for new volunteers. At the beginning of each year, each volunteer is 'allocated' to one of the direction members, who takes the role of godfather/mother. The godfather/mother is responsible for guiding the volunteer along the 'service pathway', and support him/her. Here, seniority means more knowledge and wisdom. Admiration, then, grows hand-in-hand with hierarchy, since the more dedicated and experienced one is, the higher the place in the hierarchy. This explains a certain mysticism involving the founders of TOGod, observable in the way the volunteers talk about them, like Xana below:

I remember last year, during the 'reflection weekend' I had the privilege of meeting Raul, one of TOGod's founders, and wow… he is awesome. It was really great talking to him, to meet him! I was lucky to have been in the same group as one the TOGod's founders… it is so inspiring… that person is an angel! (December 9th)

These internal dynamics seem to be effective as they foster admiration and, consequently, strengthen the sense of belonging. Additionally, the hyperbolization of affection that characterizes the volunteers' relations in TOGod favors a 'brotherhood spirit' – older volunteers call each other 'bros/sis' and are constantly hugging and smiling at each other.

There is another crucial dimension in being a volunteer here: the requirement of constant *reflection* about oneself as volunteer. Once a year TOGod organizes a weekend focused on self-development. This is one of the rare activities in which TOGod´s founder, Raul, participates, since he now works for a global humanitarian organization and lives abroad. For this annual weekend, in which the ethnographer took part, TOGod rented a large country house, property of the Catholic Church. The weekend's theme was "Dream to fulfil". Opening one of the reflection sessions, Raul elucidated the audience:

> Thinking about what we do, about the service, is crucial in order we can be better and more prepared to face the personal, professional and volunteering challenges. Life is tough for those who are soft. - Looking at a volunteer who was wearing a football shirt, Raul proceeds: - The game here is not football; it is love, so we have to practice the smiles, affection, the hugs, care: this is TOGod's culture. It is from individual reflection that it becomes possible to move on to reflecting about the way we are as a group. How should we intervene? The way of changing people´s lives is grounded on reflection about how to do it. This is what explains the importance of this weekend. That is why this it is fundamental to engage in this exercise of contemplating life. (February 27th).

This culture of reflection is constantly inculcated in volunteers. The hyperbolization of affection and positive attitudes stand out, as recognized by a volunteer during a 'group sharing moment':

At the beginning, when I came to TOGod, I thought all of this was a bit weird. It seemed that everyone was stoned…always talking about love… In Covelo [the small village where the 'work weekend' took place] I realized that I had also caught the disease… and, I must say, I have never felt so healthy. (Claudia, January 30th)

Interestingly, while this kind of participation is recurrently portrayed as happening in a smooth, positive fashion, it seems to require a good deal of personal effort, as there is a clear demand of exposing one's 'inner feelings' to the group. This practice takes place during 'moments of sharing' that are aimed at promoting personal reflection, and at making each person think about his/her role as a volunteer in order to better deal with such a demanding task. The 'moments of sharing' were often intensely emotional. In the excerpt below, a volunteer asks herself if she is doing enough:

Joana (a first-year volunteer), with her eyes closed and her head resting on her knees, said:
- I'm feeling a bad person…because I was a little disconnected today… I feel that TOGod was crucial [for the beneficiaries] but I wasn't.
A boy (a first-year volunteer) reacts:
- Don't feel like that, Joana. This has been the best weekend of my life. Here I feel I can be myself, I was really needing this. (…) This weekend is made by each person. So I have to thank you, Joana, for being here.
Joana still had her eyes closed and her head on her knees, hiding her face. She seemed to be crying. After the sharing moment I saw Joana going towards that boy and hugging him. (January 30th)

TOGod's volunteer training systematically promotes this kind of self-reflexivity. All

meetings include activities that stimulate volunteers to "look inside". The flip side of this continuous reflection is that it seems to narrow the opportunities for different ways of being a volunteer. Indeed, the conflict between what each person is and what he/she should be (the collective meaning-making of volunteering) is smoothened by the existing bonds, ultimately leaning towards conformity with the norms of what makes a good TOGod volunteer.

Being fully committed to the organization necessarily means embodying its identity. This is central in TOGod, considering details such as some of its songs, in which the word 'God' is substituted by 'TOGod', or when a volunteer guiding a moment of prayer says:

> Each one of us, in his/her own way, is crucial and complements TOGod. TOGod is like God, it is omnipresent, and exists through each one of us. It is here in this weekend, and at the same time it is in Timor through the volunteers who are there, serving. (Xana, February 27th)

Living as a volunteer seems to be the corollary of the relationship with *the Other*. During a sharing moment in the 'reflection weekend', Marisa, a 22-year-old university student and third year volunteer states her feelings:

> From this weekend I take a strong feeling of having been deeply taken care of. TOGod is a dream come true. TOGod is a dreams machine; we help make dreams come true. And it is by doing this that I feel good. (…) TOGod is not a physical thing, TOGod is inside me. (February 28th)

For these volunteers, then, participating in TOGod becomes 'a way of being'. This is in accord with the great deal of work the organization puts into working each volunteer's perception of him/herself. This personal transformation is presented as a precondition for work with others, 'to make the world a better place'. As Maria, a member of the direction board, stated during the

'reflection weekend':

> This is not a part-time job, we are TOGod, and making the world a better place is in our DNA. (March 16th).

While TOGod is a non-religious organization and not all volunteers are religious, the higher ranks of the organization (namely, the founders and the board of directors) have close connections to the Catholic Church. Thus, they organize moments of prayer, although these are non-mandatory and actually few people take part in them. Another element in TOGod's internal culture that clearly resonates with Catholicism is the authority of more experienced volunteers (the godfather and the godmother): the ones who take on more responsibilities, who serve more, are also the ones who take care more.

Thus, volunteering in TOGod is more than just a practice; it is almost a belief system. The immaterial service of care is to be carried out with increasing quality, unfolding as a virtuous cycle. This is the way that TOGod volunteers appear to understand the volunteering culture: they live and relate to others in meaningful, active ways, focusing on high standards of affection. Antonio, an older volunteer, explained this in the following way:

> TOGod is probably the only NGO I know that pays all this attention to the volunteer, which encourages self-analysis (…) such moments, in which we care for each other, enable us to serve with quality. (…) which is crucial because our work is not tangible or material, we do not give soups or distribute clothes. (February 28th)

TOGod, then, is the anchor for the personal transformation sought through this reflexive work focused on self-knowledge. You care for others in and through TOGod, you get to know

yourself better using TOGod as a mirror, until you find TOGod inside you and then you become TOGod yourself. The 'volunteering formula' of TOGod indeed appears to carry mystical elements, or possibly include an indoctrination process that is hard on some people. While all this may look like an odd 'fusion of theology and managerialism' (Bunn and Wood, 2012: 642), our material shows that, for many volunteers, TOGod provides truly intense, demanding, yet also rewarding experiences.

The puzzles of volunteering (or the complexities of the quality of participation)

We began this article with a focus on the relationship between the civic and the political engagements. The ethnographic material we collected compelled us to ask: how does one construct his/her role as a citizen, pursuing a better world for the needy, in such a seemingly conflict-free environment, without bringing to the fore the underlying socio-political structure? Indeed, doing good without thinking about or discussing the origins of social problems reminds us of the sharp separation between the civic and the political life that Eliasoph (1998, 2013) found in the United States, where discussions with different viewpoints and collective analyses of the wider socio-political context were often regarded as depressing and difficult. The organization's task would then be reduced to carrying out projects 'with which no humane person could disagree (…) thus severing any connection between civic volunteering and political engagement' (Eliasoph, 2013: 12).

However, our case shows significant differences to Eliasoph's research settings, namely in what she has pointed out as the shortcomings of empowerment projects (2011, x-xi, 231-246). First, 'plug-in volunteering', which leads to volunteering for the sake of volunteering (or for the sake of better CVs) does not occur in TOGod, as one of its distinctive features is precisely long-term commitment: each volunteer agrees to a minimum of one-year collaboration in a single

setting. Furthermore, volunteers are required to offer several work hours per week to the chosen setting. Moreover, TOGod's projects and partnerships typically last for years, and its partner institutions tend to give it positive feedback, contrary to what happens in organizations analyzed by Eliasoph, in which pressures to report achievements to funders promote look-a-like successes and the misrecognition of the needs of the target groups. Finally, TOGod's volunteers display high levels of satisfaction, motivation and personal engagement, and do not seem to have immediate instrumental reasons for volunteering. Yet, the question of soothing and/or concealing tensions – one that Eliasoph stresses as crucial in understanding the consequences of volunteering cultures and political citizenship (ibid.: 246-254) – is clearly puzzling in TOGod's case, too: during the entire fieldwork period, the ethnographer never encountered a situation in which a conflict or a political disagreement unfolded openly.

Nevertheless, as Lichterman and Eliasoph (2014: 810) stress, if 'actors […] see their action as grounded in and speaking to "society" however they imagine it, their action is potentially civic'. TOGod elaborates a shared meaning of what a better world should be, how to organize around this common goal and, together, achieve it. Thus, it generates collective efficacy – related to the belief that as a group they can overcome difficulties and be effective in their activity (Barrett and Brunton-Smith, 2014). Additionally, religion seems to be a driver not only of collective efficacy but, more generally, of civic work in TOGod's case. While it does not define itself as a religious organization, its repertoires of action and forms of communication frequently cross boundaries between the religious and the non-religious (Lichterman, 2012). Indeed, the 'moments of sharing', infused with emotional resonance, resemble the Durkheimian (1912) ceremonial activity that fosters membership and, in some way, effectiveness, while dissolving individual identities into the group. Collective emotional arousal binds people to the values held by the group, leading them to conformity with collectively shared norms. In this vein, Lichterman (2008: 98) states that

'whether theologically articulate or not, civic groups may use religious language to address the practical problems of creating collective identities and working together'. In other words, the religious dimension may legitimize, naturalize and reinforce collective cognition about volunteering and a given notion of civic identity (Lichterman, 2008). Here, a better world is pursued through continuous, engaged self-monitoring. This 'work of the self on the self' translates into specific languages (e.g., ways of talking) and techniques (e.g., sharing moments) that operationalize the 'technologies of the self' (Foucault, 1997) through which one can act upon one's soul and thoughts. In this approach, social change is more grounded in personal transformation (making oneself a positive and kind human being) than in engagement with structural political issues such as social inequality and social policies. Also, the 'emotional investment' in collective identities (Melucci 1995) plays a major role in creating the levels of commitment enjoyed in TOGod, illustrated, for instance, by a volunteer's statement that 'sometimes [TOGod] is more of a family than my own'. The role of affective bonds in motivating participation has been suggested by previous studies (Epstein 1991; Jasper 2006), and TOGod's case also echoes McDonald's description of 'experience movements', in which private, embodied and communicative experiences are determined by 'the relationship to the other, in which the self becomes another' (2004: 590).

We argue that TOGod's approach offers volunteers an added sense of ontological security that they do not wish to jeopardize by engaging in political debate, not even in a period of political effervescence like the one in which this ethnography was conducted. Indeed, the members of TOGod never mentioned the socio-political scenario, not even the political issues directly related with the population with whom they work: the political disinvestment of the past few years regarding mentally disabled people, with institutions struggling with lack of financial support, the increasing numbers of homeless people without a sustained governmental strategy

for their integration, etc. This silence suggests an intentional protection from political debate, regarded as inconvenient because it might bring in conflictual dimensions that would challenge features that make TOGod an efficient organization at what it seeks to do. TOGod's civic imagination, then, rests on a notion of personal development and volunteering as the bases for enhancing the common good.

With regard to the notion of quality of participation, the ethnographic work in TOGod enabled us to add complexity to it. On the one hand, TOGod's volunteering culture meets several criteria of high quality participation by QEP: strong involvement of members, their commitment to several activities, and a continuous concern with reflection in order to improve effectiveness. On the other hand, the avoidance of conflict and the depoliticization of engagement were flagrant regarding how the construct of 'quality of participation' is grounded, among other things, on the importance of dissonance (as confrontation with plural opinions leads to cognitive development). Our ethnographic study thus shows that the conflict dimension of 'quality participation' can be entirely absent. The mixed methods approach we deployed thus highlights that participation is not a black-and-white phenomenon: from a psychological perspective (QEP), TOGod's volunteers are the prototype of committed, engaged, active citizens working towards social change; from a sociological perspective, they emerge as a conflict-avoiding, faith-enacting group, efficient in implementing social care and personal well-being and self-efficacy of its volunteers.

Finally, returning to Eliasoph's seminal critique of civic engagement as 'automatically' fostering democracy, our study shows that two very different volunteer practices that generate very different individual, group and community outcomes can nonetheless both lead to depoliticized volunteering cultures. Indeed, we have shown that participation in a NGO can comprise continuous commitment to social causes, efficacy in addressing its goals, reflection about the participation experiences in intentionally supportive conditions, and meaningful

individual rewards; however, it can also take place a conflict-free environment, in which structural social problems are left unanalyzed, and politics is disavowed. Following Zukin et al. (2006: 52), this is highly problematic, as 'neither (civic or political) alone is sufficient to address the myriad collective decisions that must be made in advanced democracies'. In the context of dismantling welfare States, the grim yet rather realistic assumption can be made that depoliticized volunteer organizations may act as little helpers, but not as challengers to the political project of austerity.

Future research could attempt to describe and analyze the configuration of the relationship between the civic and the political in other settings and groups, and in different countries. Additionally, further research could try to learn who and where are the youngsters who 'just evaporate': what their motivations were and what kind of participatory trajectory they chose instead (if any).

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