Participation On and Beyond the Boundaries: Brazilian Youth Activism in Radical Right Movements

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Received: 29 November 2022 | Accepted: 24 April 2023 | Published online: 21 November 2023

Abstract

Drawing on the analysis of biographical interviews with Brazilian activists, this article explores youth activism in radical right movements as a challenge to and indicator of 21st-century democratic transformation through the lens of youth participation studies. In recognition of the symbolic boundaries that institutionalized discourses of democratic youth participation produce, participation in radical right movements is analysed as a case of ‘liminal participation’. The article begins with a brief overview of the literature on youth participation in radical right movements in Brazil and Europe, with a focus on how the concept of ‘liminal participation’ can be used to analyse it. We then reconstruct four biographies and discuss how liminality emerges as a strategy and a negotiation status, related to processes of youth politicization. Finally, the findings are related to a broader reflection on democracy and participation in a society of risks in which conflict and antagonism play a central role.
Keywords


Introduction

The increase of populism and radical right-wing activism is widely seen as a threat to democracy due to their linkages to racism, sexism, and justification of violence against individuals and groups. Accordingly, the radical populist right is often seen as being different from and external to democracy. Such an analysis maintains clear-cut distinctions between left and right not only as a reflection of the social reality of functional ideologies for political action and mobilization but also for social research, which aims at generalizing knowledge of individuals’ political attitudes and behaviour through standardized and representative surveys. However, there is increasing evidence, first, of the heterogeneity of (not only) young people who are attracted to, support or engage in populist or radical right-wing movements (Mudde, 2014; 2016; Krasteva, 2017; Pasieka, 2021; 2022). Second, while populist and radical right-wing positions tend to explicitly deny fundamental democratic principles such as equality, they also claim to uphold democratic rights and processes and justify their positions by referring to experiences of injustice. Third, by positioning the radical right just as a risk to democracy, social research overlooks how young people perceive the current risks of exclusion and social inequalities (Buchholz et al., 2009; Giugni & Grasso, 2021) as democratic institutions increasingly fail to secure equal democratic rights for all (Mouffe, 2018; Huke, 2021).

From this perspective, reproducing the distinction between ‘real’ youth political participation and participation in populist or radical right-wing movements seems premature. On the one hand, such a distinction neglects the difference between both politics and the political and between existing democratic orders and institutions and the principle of democracy while failing to account for the transformation dynamics of contemporary democracies. On the other hand, this tends to essentialize young people involved in these movements as non-democratic and deviant rather than as individuals involved in an ongoing process of politicization, in which they are positioned and positioning themselves in ‘democratic’ society.

The present paper draws on the analysis of data collected for a study investigating youth activism in radical right movements in Brazil and Germany.
The research aims to expand scholarly knowledge on this topic through a comparative analysis based on biographical interviews. In contrast to studies that consider left-wing participation as 'mobilization' but see right-wing activism as deviant, we analyse activism in radical right movements as a case of 'liminal' youth participation that is not fully recognized as participation (Pitti et al., 2021). We begin our analysis with a literature review of radical right movements and youth participation, focusing on how the concept of 'liminal participation' can be used as a heuristic for analysing young people's activism in those movements. We then present data from the Brazilian sample of the aforementioned research project and reconstruct four biographies of young people involved in the radical right movements. On this basis, in a third section, commonalities identified in the interviews are elaborated, revealing a combination of recognized practices of formal participation and aspects of non-recognized claims marked by attacks on gender rights and state legitimacy. The article concludes with a broader reflection on perspectives of democratic negotiation and participation in a society of risks characterized by conflict and antagonism (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001; Jeffrey & Mcdowell, 2004).

The Rise of Radical Right Youth Activism as a Case of Liminal Participation?

The rise of a European radical right has been the subject of many debates and academic research in recent years. The research tradition is mainly concentrated in the fields of political and social sciences, represented by the development of quantitative research on voting behaviours and party analysis (Mudde, 2007; 2014). Recently, however, research has developed approaches for interpreting youth engagement in radical right movements from a broader perspective.

It is widely agreed that at the turn of the 21st century, the populist radical right has become the dominant ideology within the European far right. Among the far right, Mudde (2014) differentiates the radical right from the extreme right in its partial acceptance of democratic principles like popular sovereignty and majority rule although it shares the extreme right’s denial of liberal democracy, especially constitutional protection of (ethnic, political, religious) minorities, the separation of powers, and the rule of law.

In contrast to earlier studies, which often centred on white-male engagement (Nilan, 2021) or the preponderance of adherence among the lower classes (Betz, 2018), recent research emphasises the heterogeneity of young people who engage in or support radical right-wing movements. This body...
of research (Krasteva, 2017; Miller-Idriss, 2018; Caiani et al., 2012; Gattinara & Pirro, 2019; Bringel & Pleyers, 2019) avoids labelling youth activists in the radical right with psychoanalytical or psychological personality disorders as the ‘authoritarian personality’ syndrome or other explanations that position them as ‘victims of the system’. Instead, these studies depict youth activists as a complex and diverse array of individuals, including ‘students, intellectuals, and entrepreneurs’ (Pasieka, 2022, p. 174). Moreover, they also suggest avoiding the use of the term ‘radical right youth’ as this indicates a fixed position or identity rather than a movement. Miller-Idriss (2018) proposes that identities be classified as ‘fluid, complex and contradictory, with boundaries that are porous rather than fixed’ (ibid., p. 351), as youth engagement in the radical right is driven by a combination of mutually reinforcing structural conditions and cultural factors.

Krasteva’s (2017) analysis of the diverse manifestations of radical right youth populism in Europe and their fluid boundaries in regard to agency, identities, (sub)cultures, and citizenship, de- and reconstructs the radical right using two conceptual lenses. First, the concept of a ‘lost generation’ focuses on structural factors that contribute to the emergence of radical right movements, including socio-economic deficits and contradictions resulting from economic crisis and neoliberal globalization. Second and by contrast, she employs the concept of ‘contestatory citizenship’ to emphasize young people’s agency in determining their political choices and activism. Relating both lenses, ‘the activists themselves are situated in different positions across the wide spectrum of far-right agency, forming a bricolage of identities, images, imaginaries’ (ibid., p. 152).

Pasieka’s (2021) ethnographic study of activists in Italy, Poland, Hungary, and Slovakia, identifies that radical right movements provide younger generations with the tools they need to be active and to develop a self-concept as agents of change. Caiani et al. (2012) define radical right movements as rational, purposeful, and organized, relying on organizational resources, repertoires, and frames that reflect political opportunities. They identify how radical right groups establish complex discourses that are structured by frames that pay considerable attention to broad political issues that then form right-wing activists’ self-identity. In sum, such literature considers the complexity and fluid boundaries of new radical right movements and their activism, which (1) involve younger people, (2) are less organised in form of traditional parties, (3) combine online and offline activities, (4) have similar characteristics as social movements, (5) involve transnational patterns, and (6) provide self-identification, group recognition, and a strong ideal of social change.
In Brazil, the radical right has grown significantly since 2013 and is commonly referred to as the 'New Right' (Gentile, 2018; Cepêda, 2018; Rocha, 2019). Academic and public interest increased after 2018 with the election of Jair Bolsonaro as Brazilian President. Rocha (2018), drawing on ethnographic research and interviews, details how a flourishing militancy in the Brazilian ‘New Right’ intensified after protest pro impeachment of the former president Dilma Rousseff emerging from local groups, online forums, and young volunteers. After 2016, many of these groups began to mobilize in person through protests, meetings, and training sessions—even among the university community—and this resulted in higher participation in right-wing political and social movements (Klüppel et al., 2021). Severo et al. (2021) surveyed private and public Brazilian high schools to understand more about young people's political positioning. They found that religion, predominantly Catholic and Evangelical Protestantism, is a significant element in this identification among right and extreme-right-wing students.

The qualitative study by Sousa et al. (2022) on right-wing conservative militancy in public universities depicts how right-wing identity constructions are marked by contradictions, conflicts, and tensions. Bringel & Pleyers (2019) analyse it as a reconfiguration of activism in which polarisation and a discourse of urgency of action are central. Weller and Bassalo (2020) analyse the rise in the radical right as an insurgency by a generation of young conservatives. Following Mannheim (1952), they claim that in each new generation, young people establish new forms of interpreting and giving sense to the world in a permanent movement of forming new sociabilities and identities. This Weltanschauung combines traditionalist values and customs and a liberal economic model.

The review of European and Brazilian research on young people in radical right movements highlights the problem of drawing clear-cut boundaries between youth political participation and radical right activism. Weller and Bassalo (2020) therefore criticise the still-existing gap in youth studies regarding the understanding of young people’s engagement in radical right movements. In particular, a significant part of youth research excludes radical right activism from youth participation which reflects the often-neglected relation between analytical and normative perspectives.

For some time, the most dominant and visible part of youth studies have used surveys that assess young people’s attitudes, orientations, and behaviours towards politics, democracy, or towards activities like voting or membership in political organisations to analyse young people's political participation. These studies focus on historical trends of participation increase or decline and differences according to social inequalities among social groups (Giugni
& Grasso, 2021; Ellison et al., 2020). With the cultural turn in youth research, however, new interpretations and methodologies that focused on qualitative approaches have gained prominence, including the analysis of everyday experiences and youth cultural practice (cf. Pfaff, 2009). Biographical studies represent a shift towards the interpretation of political participation in terms of subjectivity and identities and how different forms of participation emerge in the process of growing up (Schwanenflügel et al., 2019). These studies show that engagement and participation emerge from young people’s search for belonging and recognition (cf. Honneth, 1995) which makes them leave their familiar social contexts and move through public spaces, not necessarily intentionally but for necessity (cf. Renström et al., 2021). Starting from different biographical constellations and unequal access to specific contexts of participation, prior experiences of (mis)recognition in formal institutions, especially school or youth welfare, have a major influence on whether they rather look for and find what they need in formal participation or informal youth cultural settings.

The analysis of informal practices has allowed for a more comprehensive concept of youth participation. It reveals that youth participation is relational—interdependent on practices and relationships of (mis)recognition—and processual (Walther et al., 2020). However, rather than focusing on whether actions are political and participatory or not, recent research approaches have suggested to distinguish between practices and subject positions that are recognized as political participation and others that are not. While experts, institutional actors and adults in general tend to ascribe youth councils, voluntary engagement, involvement in civil society initiatives, or membership in parties a wider social relevance, youth cultural practice that is relevant ‘only’ for those involved tends to be categorized as irrelevant or ‘not yet’ participating in the right way; or even as deviant where not complying with established norms and rules (Batsleer et al., 2020). It has been, therefore, suggested to conceptualize informal youth participation as constellations ‘inbetween’, replacing the essentializing and individualizing distinction between political and not (yet) political with different constellations of liminality (Pitti et al., 2021).

The concept of liminality, developed by van Gennep (1909/1960) in his systematization of life-course transitions, denotes a phase that separates an old status from a new one characterized by an ‘inbetween’ situation that lacks a recognized social status (cf. Turner, 1969). However, liminality is not simply temporal—as the phase mode suggests—but includes the spaces in which movements between subject positions occur. Formally institutionalized transitions in particular involve specialized transition spaces that seek to prepare transitioning individuals for a new position, such as schools,
prevocational schemes, counselling centres, care homes, or formal youth participation settings like youth councils.

Pitti et al. (2021) apply the concept of liminality to spaces between recognized political subject positions: as a heuristic, *liminal participation* consequently refers to practices in public spaces by which individuals express claims of belonging and taking part even if not recognized as such by others. In a similar direction, Butler (2015) suggests that the notion of the public sphere should be extended beyond institutionalized public spaces to encompass any ‘spaces of appearance’. In fact, analysing the public sphere in terms of social space helps bringing claims of belonging and participation that do not meet the criteria of the dominant order of recognition into view. Andersson (2015) proposes that political socialization be conceptualized as a situated process that emerges when individuals move through public spaces and attempt to transform such spaces into meaningful places whereby the political takes different meanings, not only for each individual but also in contradiction from what is institutionally recognized (cf. Skelton, 2015; Kallio, 2018). Therefore, practices that evolve in liminal spaces should be considered as a structural constellation of being ‘inbetween’ (Pitti et al., 2021) and must not be mistaken as individual movements from not participating to participating in the ‘right’ way.

Applied to youth political participation, liminality refers to a condition of ‘in-betweenness’ differing from ‘marginality’ which ‘describes the relationship between a given centre and periphery’ while ‘liminality shifts attention to the movements between two (or more) clearly defined points of reference’ (*ibid.*, p. 7). This implies viewing participation not necessarily as a concept that describes only those constellations of harmonious political negotiation and dialogue but also those of social conflict. Societal antagonism in terms of diverging interests under conditions of inequality (Mouffe, 2013) is reflected by spatial boundaries demarcating specific spaces as public and assigning them to particular recognized purposes. While modern democracy has evolved from ‘struggles for recognition’, Honneth (2011) observes an increasing ‘wildness of social conflict’ in terms of social practice emerging beyond normatively legitimized institutions (cf. Walther et al., 2020; Schwanenflügel & Walther, 2022). As a heuristic concept, liminal participation emphasises how practices of participation can oscillate between recognized and non-recognized subject positions whereby boundaries between participation and non-participation are blurred.

**Data and Research Methods**

The following analysis draws on qualitative empirical data from biographies of young people engaged in radical right-wing movements in Brazil to explore
the explanatory potential of liminal participation as a concept to further scholarly understanding of radical right activism. Interviews were conducted as part of a research project that compares the biographies of young people in Brazil and Germany to contextualize their participation in radical right-wing movements in relation to different welfare regimes and different political cultures (Chevalier, 2019; Walther, 2022).

This research project began with interviews with young activists from radical right-wing movements in Brazil on which the analysis documented in this article is based. Biographical interviews were conducted to reconstruct how young people make meaning of engaging in such movements. Biographical interviews are a specific type of narrative interview usually comprising three stages (Rosenthal, 2004). First, a rather open question stimulates the interviewee to describe their biographical trajectory freely. In the initial interview stage, the interviewer’s job is to maintain the narrative flow without making any substantial interventions. In the second stage, the questioning period, the interviewer asks (immanent) questions about things the interviewee mentioned. In the final stage, the interviewer asks (exmanent) questions about topics the interviewee has not mentioned but are of interest to the researcher. In this study, questions in the final stage focused on political perceptions and pathways to political engagement, while also identifying the interviewees’ main activities and points of reference.

A professional Instagram profile was created to identify and follow radical right-wing movements. The researchers observed the right-wing movements for several months. First, young people who identified themselves as activists on their social media profiles or who had been tagged in posts by radical right-wing movements were invited to participate in the interviews. Then, the snowball method was employed as an acknowledged strategy allowing for a non-probability sampling ‘useful for studying certain hard-to-reach groups’ (Vinuto, 2014, p. 203), leading to a sample of young people aged between 18 and 32 years. The two years spent exploring the networks helped create a relationship and sense of proximity and to maintain the principle of ‘openness’ during the interviews (cf. Damhuis and Jonge, 2022). Eight interviews were conducted between October 2021 and July 2022 with young Brazilian activists representing a variety of movements, genders, and national regions from the South to the North of the country. Initially, in-person interviews were planned. However, because of the COVID-19 pandemic and regional distances, they were shifted to online interviews using video calls. This implied limitations such as the impossibility of using non-verbal information analysis, ethical concerns of confidentiality (Germani et al., 2022), and difficulties in establishing an initial relationship between interviewer and interviewee. However, the average
interviews length of one hour and a half and the quality of the generated narratives indicate that openness was achieved, allowing interviewees to express their views and experiences.

The project was submitted and approved by the Brazilian Ethical Research Council and participants were asked to review and sign an informed consent form which was sent via email before the interviews. All participants signed the form confirming that they had been informed about the general objective of the research, the methods, and the assurance of data protection and anonymisation. All names and places have been changed in the transcription files which will be deleted at the end of the research. The eight interviews have been analysed according to a combination of the grounded theory approach and sequential biographical analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Rosenthal, 2004; Charmaz, 2014).

Four interviews were selected for a process of in-depth reconstruction, according to the principle of contrast regarding the path of engagement, family histories, elements of race and gender, as well as types of movement. In the following, first, biographies are briefly summarized to acknowledge the sequential construction by the interviewees. After this, key categories elaborated from the coding process are discussed with regard to the heuristic concept of ‘liminal participation’.

**Vinicius, ‘A Childhood Game that I Ended up Liking’**

Vinicius is 25 years old and comes from a peripheral region in a coastal city. He presents himself, from the outset, as a studious young man who was already involved in politics as a child. Both his mother and grandmother worked as domestic help for a wealthy family in his town, and it was through that family that he became involved in an electoral campaign when he was seven. He describes political activism as ‘a childhood game’ that he ended up liking. In high school, Vinicius had joined various student councils and the Catholic church. He had three siblings, but two of them died of causes he did not mention.

Around 2013, he approached a left-wing movement and participated in the June Journeys of 2013, massive street protests in Brazil. There he became involved in violent actions and reports that he realised the left’s radical and disorganised nature. It was during that period that he first encountered Olavo de Carvalho’s YouTube videos; a character known as the New Right’s ‘philosopher’. He describes him as ‘the most important of all (…) who taught me everything I know to this day and to this day I study him, study his books, study his statements.’ This contact led him to Jair Bolsonaro, of whom he is a supporter. At the heart of his activism is the defence of freedom and
Judeo-Christian morality. His becoming conservative is related to his own resilience and ability to thrive in a context of violence. His brother, now dead, was arrested several times and is associated with bad choices. For Vinícius, his attachment to morals and ethics protected him from repeating a ‘destiny that had already been mapped out’ for him.

Last year, he participated in an organised movement, where he met important figures and increased his involvement in grassroots work and humanitarian actions. Today, he carries out more independent activism, using social networks and supporting electoral campaigns for legislative candidates. His dream is to follow a long path in politics, going from the position of parliamentary advisor to deputy. He describes that the family his mother and grandmother had worked for admire his career. He has just moved from a slum to a more central area and is saving to move to a more-desired neighbourhood.

**Aline: ‘The Homeland Shall Be Free, or We Shall Die for Brazil’**

Aline is 20 years old and lives in a country town. She presents herself as a ‘pro-life’ activist. From a past of bullying and persecution at school, her mother—a single mom—is her main partner in life and politics. Now in university, she still lives in the same house she grew up in. Therapy has been part of her life since she was a child, first to help her cope with her father’s absence and then with the bullying she experienced later.

Aline has navigated diverse religious experiences involving important moments in the Evangelical church and a current interest in Judaism. The start of her activism coincided with the 2018 presidential election campaign when she and her mother began watching and following all the candidates’ positions. Disgusted with the ‘gender ideology’ represented by the Workers’ Party candidate, the two embarked on a journey of support for presidential candidate Jair Bolsonaro, participating in demonstrations and rallies. These demonstrations formed another essential bond between mother and daughter, who become fans of several New Right influencers and public figures. In the last three years, Aline has begun to produce content focused centrally on the anti-feminist agenda. The central statement of her first post that resonated was: ‘I owe nothing to feminism!’

Going from a process of studying YouTube videos, she discovered the importance of reading. In the last two years, the young woman has joined different political movements and has been an invited guest because of her activism in the networks. Through these contacts, she has travelled to the country’s capital, attending two conservative movement congresses. Today, Aline can already work in the area, having completed international organizations’ pro-life-related courses. Because of her activism, Aline reports
that she receives constant threats on her social networks. One message contained an image of a hanged girl with the suggestion that she should do the same.

At the time of the interview, she is sure that Bolsonaro will get the majority of the votes in the 2022 elections. If he were to lose, she points to the possibility that a civil war might erupt. Aline reports a strong identification with the Independence Brazilian Anthem, which says ‘The homeland shall be free, or we shall die for Brazil.’ Until she gets married and has kids, which she highlights as her main life goal, she wants to fight for Brazil.

Igor, ‘Defending a Noble Ideal’

Igor is 23 years old and presents himself as a law student and political activist for the restoration of the monarchical system in Brazil. Coming from a family of federally qualified lawyers, he attended Catholic private schools all his life. He now lives with his parents in a ‘middle-class neighborhood’ in a northeastern Brazilian capital, but was born in a nearby country town. Igor describes himself as a shy young man who has always preferred to be alone. His interest in politics was sparked at the age of 17, when a young female he classified as authoritarian was chosen in the school class representative election. It prompted him to question forms of government and how to interact with his classmates.

His political engagement began on Twitter, a space where those who are shy or cannot take a stand are able to communicate their views. He identifies himself as a sceptical conservative, who does not fully identify with any politician. His sceptical political position is related to his father, whom he greatly admires. However, his mother supports the left, and such contradictory positions resulted in constant conflicts in the past. Igor experienced a crisis about two years ago when he dropped out of university and rethought his path, which he thought had been too much influenced by his parents. Nevertheless, he returned to study law at a private university last year.

Igor considers the 2018 elections a critical moment where political views that had not been prominent began to appear on the public scene, including liberal and conservative economic theories. In the Brazilian scenario, he admires the fight against corruption waged by the ‘Lava-Jato Operation’ since 2015. His support for the operation’s leader led him to be involved and support the election campaign of the then Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro. During the campaign, a friend introduced him to the monarchist cause. He now studies the theme and organizes pro-monarchist demonstrations in the streets. Nevertheless, internal divisions in the monarchist movement remain a challenge.
One fundamental memory of his past is a day when he attended mass in the fourth grade, and he was the only one who knelt and showed respect. He differentiated himself from his classmates, and he began to feel as though he was a stranger among his peers. This past is a sign of his attachment to conservatism. The young man finds it difficult for Brazil to adopt a parliamentary monarchy but affirms that his activism is based on ‘defending a noble ideal’. Igor expresses a particular problem with feminist movements because he lives and experiences life as a man. According to him, the leftist agendas neglect the family and respect. In the future, he wants to get a public position in law and pursue activism in pro-monarchy movements.

**Manoel, ‘I Could Have Been Any Criminal’**

Manoel is 19 years old and lives in a slum in a capital city in southeastern Brazil. He presents himself as a law student and conservative activist. While he is completing his studies at a private university, he attended public schools throughout his life. Manoel moved from house to house during childhood and his family considered him a troubled child. Nonetheless, he has been responsible for caring for himself and his younger sister since childhood as his mother was not able to provide daily care.

He reports that a series of disappointments led him to politics. The first relates to corruption and internal agreements involving money in the soccer club he had played for. This prevented him from achieving his desired career in soccer. The second is related to his mother’s involvement in urban landless movements. Although she participated in the movement’s activities, she did not have access to her own house, which was understood by the young man as a con.

Last year was marked by losses, mainly his grandfather, who was a great model for him. Both his former coach and grandfather taught him that discipline is the foundation of life. His activism starts from his previous interest in entrepreneurship and liberal theories. He reports that videos on the subject led him to meet the ‘philosopher’ Olavo de Carvalho. Through his videos, he started a process of rethinking Brazilian history, primarily the communist threat in the country. Manoel first joined a liberal-right movement at a Brazilian public university. He describes such young people as weak and only interested in the subject of money. He has been part of his current movement since 2018 when he was invited, via Facebook, to a pro-weapons demonstration. There, he met many of his current friends.

Manoel shows pride for being such a committed and studious young man who has negated a predestined future as a criminal on the periphery. He feels that he has been prosecuted for his conservative position and has been
prevented from expressing his convictions. According to him, public schools are marked by political indoctrination and the left dominates the media and the universities, which is why he dreams of becoming a university professor. The young man actively participates in study groups and demonstrations and has private contact with the movement’s leaders. He explains that the then Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro betrayed his conservative convictions and was not a strong enough leader. He sees the future of conservatism as being beyond the president, closely related to his grassroots work and the studies his movement carries out in Brazil.

**Key Dimensions of Participating and Becoming an Activist in the Radical Right**

The four biographies introduced above reveal a diversity of ways into and meanings of participation in radical right movements. Commonalities are nonetheless also evident. The following section presents selected findings according to the key categories that emerged from the analysis of the whole range of interviews.

**Trajectories and Self-Presentation**

Looking at the trajectories of the interviewed young people reveals that social and family background do not determine participation in radical right movements in a one-directional way as often assumed with regard to formal participation (Giugni & Grasso, 2021). In fact, the eight interviewees vary substantially regarding social class. This corresponds with the literature review, which confirms that activism in radical right movements in Brazil appears to spread across different social classes (Solano, 2018). It is striking, however, that even interviewees from privileged backgrounds express experiences of instability, precariousness, and injustice in their lives, whether these are constant processes of moving, family changes, or an absent father (which is a widespread condition in many Brazilian families; cf. Fernandes, 2021), as well as experiences of bullying at school, in university, and in other peer contexts. Most young people referred to themselves as shy or introverted and presented the experience of being part of a movement as a way of coping with these experiences. Although the individual trajectories are diverse, corruption scandals and the pro-impeachment movements against the former president Dilma Rousseff in 2015 and 2016 emerged as decisive turning points in collective experiences of injustice. By relating their lives to the collective
experiences of injustice, they legitimize framing their individual experiences as ‘unjust’.

Referring to these turning points where individual experiences become collective, different meanings of politics can be identified, involving politics as a source of recognition and upward mobility (Vinicius), a strong family bond (Aline), a negation of a predetermined future (Manoel) and a proof of nobleness (Igor). The young people present their rising interest in topics such as entrepreneurship and meritocracy as bridges to positioning themselves as conservative. Being conservative, however, is rather presented as a ‘lifestyle’, ‘life philosophy’ or even a ‘personal trait’:

For me, conservatism is not an ideology, but a lifestyle. I was amazed because conservatism covers everything I thought about abortion, drugs, public safety, and family, and that I identify with. (Vinicius)

Beyond identifying with conservativism, they also position themselves as ‘libertarian’, ‘paleo-libertarian’, or ‘liberal’ centred around the free market and individual freedom or even ‘monarchist’. They reference being ‘anti-feminist’ and point to feminism and LGBTQI+ movements as being great threats to the traditional family and Brazilian society. Like Aline, in particular, other young women interviewed for the study refer to anti-feminist or pro-life agendas as the main drivers that brought them into activism. Moreover, while all interviewees present themselves as Christians, whether Catholic or Evangelical, the trajectories of these young women are influenced by the Neopentecostal Church, which has impacted the vocabulary of human rights in the country (Teixeira & Barbosa, 2022).

**Significant Others, Virtual Spaces, and the Virtue of Studying**

The engagement process is usually stimulated and supported by others, this can be family members, especially in the cases of Aline, Manoel and Igor, or famous right-wing leaders, such as Olavo de Carvalho, known as ‘the professor’ or ‘the philosopher’ of the ‘New Right’ and serving as a role model for coping with critique and judgment experienced when becoming a conservative.

While significant others act as role models concerning the development of not only a political perspective but also conservative values, most interviewees also point to social media (Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram) as spaces where they found the first groups and invitations to demonstrations. YouTube is referred to as a fundamental source and space to build the first elements of a conservative identification. In their comments on digital activism, the interviewees referenced numbers of followers and viewers, revealing
their search for recognition. Most of them combine in-person activities with intensive production of digital content. Digital content also references literature ‘distributed by publishing houses that start directing their offers to a public interested in authors intellectually connected to the right-wing political camp’ (Silva, 2018, p. 83).

All the interviewees referred to the process of ‘studying’ as a fundamental tool to being recognized as a politicized young person. They emphasized their role as active students who base their political opinions and analysis mainly on books. Participating in anti-feminist groups led Aline to start reading books:

My mother and I were never used to reading, you know? I always hated reading … I still don't like to read, but I force myself, you know? … Because I know that books have content that videos don't have. (Aline)

She mentions it almost as an obligation, and many interviewees pointed to the process of studying and researching as a fundamental ‘task’ of being an activist. Studying and becoming a knowledge source for others in social networks or inside the movements help to present an image of career-oriented and responsible young people. In the beginning, some presented their trajectory in an organized and prepared way, emphasizing their distinctions and voluntary work, projecting their activism as part of a professional career that they envision for the near future. Through this commitment, several activists showed a desire to differentiate themselves from ‘ordinary young people’. However, those coming from peripheral areas point to a difference related to the strength of keeping themselves distant from the world of crime and drugs:

If you look at my trajectory, I could have been some criminal, right? For everything I went through there, people went through the same thing; they took other paths. I can say that I am the most successful of them all, you know? So much so that the school even made me a picture, right? The school where I studied said ‘the guy went to university; he is following his path.’ (Manoel)

**Being a Countermovement between Grassroots and Anti-State Militancy**

Education is also presented as a means that can expand the movement by mobilizing people. Interviewees state that grassroots activities used to be associated with left-wing movements and that one of the primary transformations of the new conservative was identifying the need to organize and go to the peripheries and educate and mobilize the people. Grassroots
activities are connected with humanitarian actions like donations and volunteer work. All referred to activism as a non-paid activity and as a step towards a future career as a legislative representative, a professor, or an advisor. The young people are concerned with presenting their will to be the actors of change, pointing to activism as a great responsibility. Accepting this responsibility requires recognition that provides a ‘refuge’ where they can share their perceptions and positions as well as the shared feelings of injustice. Manoel states:

But they are afraid to express their opinion because you have to be a person with a lot of personality to speak against the mainstream, because the left-wing people in college are very noisy and they are very dirty, right? You have to be a real man! You have to be a real woman to go against the consensus, right? (Manoel)

The idea of engagement in a ‘countermovement’ is a common element identified in the interviews. The young interviewees present themselves as being those who go ‘against the flow’, reflected in their dissatisfaction with the state and opposition to what they referred as a ‘hegemonic left-wing culture’. Bringel and Pleyers (2019, p. 251) argue that in June 2013 a new generation of activists was mobilized which did not ‘have the same experiences, worldviews and connections with the popular democratic field of the 1970’s and 1980’s hegemonized by the Workers Party (PT)’. However, even in the period of Jair Bolsonaro's presidency, the interviewees attacked the State, criticizing deficits in providing people with the minimal conditions of dignity. In several narratives, the State is presented as an enemy that abuses its power and limits individual freedom. Using arguments based on historical revisionism, some of them express that previous authoritarian leaders, such as Hitler, disarmed the population in order to impose a dictatorship. Translating the idea of the state as a potential tyrant, they defend armament as a fundamental individual right. Such a perception of the state is also evident in broader questions about the democratic system and its legitimacy. Despite the previous victory of their main leader, some interviewees point to the possible corruption of the voting system. Facing the possibility that President Jair Bolsonaro might not win the 2022 elections, Aline points out:

I don’t know, it’s very, very hard to predict, because I, unfortunately, don’t believe 100% in the polls the way they are. Because there is no auditing, the electronic ballot was not really audited. We don’t know if it is really that number. I don’t know! I am not sure. I want to see if my vote was
really counted because I am not sure. We are in a situation where a civil war could happen, I believe it could happen ... As long as I don't have a family, I will keep fighting, if necessary, I will die for Brazil. (Aline)

The possibility of dying expresses the idea of a violent conflict as a feasible scenario. Their enemies are pointed to as being dangerous and part of a greater project of state control. The countermovement position justifies both the necessity of organizing the grassroots activities and bringing more people to the movement as well as of increasing the legitimation of violence as a ‘necessary’ evil to prevent their enemies’ projects.

**Discussion: Expressions of Liminality**

The analysis reveals a dynamic combination of applying recognized practices and positions of political participation, such as demonstrations or campaigning, while contents and claims partly transgress the boundaries of what is widely understood as democratic, i.e. questioning equal opportunities and human rights. These practices move between subject positions and differ according to paths and levels of engagement. Attacks on political correctness—referred to as a boredom of the left and a lack of freedom of speech—contradict the radical right’s power in the country at the time of the interviews but allow them to occupy new spaces and fight to expand the limits of what can be shared in the public sphere.

Such constellations have been explored in terms of the mainstreaming or ‘normalization’ of far-right discourses (Vieten & Poynting, 2022). While Nilan (2021) and Sousa et al. (2022) interpret the right’s position as a victim and a marginalized minority fighting for freedom and pluralism as a strategy rather than a condition, our findings also reveal constellations of liminal participation. In the data, we find evidence that young people involved in radical right movements are aware that their claims might be seen as non-democratic, and they negotiate these limits through recognized and democratic forms of participation.

This tension becomes the most obvious in the conflict between the relevance ascribed to studying as a way into activism and participation and the propensity to transgress the boundaries of what is widely held as a consensus of democratic dialogue, namely accepting violence as a means of political participation. On the one hand, activists present themselves as ‘self-made men or women’ in their narratives reflecting that they both adhere to an order of recognition that makes formal participation a condition of being prepared
and educated and taking responsibility in and for wider society. The figure of ‘self-made man/woman’ has been elaborated as an ideal type of participation characterized by ‘career-oriented forms of “experimentation” for their search for self-efficacy, or “taking responsibility” for themselves and others in their identities’ (Lüküslü & Walther, 2021). On the other hand, the idea of fighting and dying for the country reflects discourses marked by tensions, conflict, and contradictions. Sousa et al. (2022) affirm that ‘another way to give unity to this militancy is to look to its antagonistic exterior, to the instance that antagonizes it and paradoxically constitutes it’ (p. 13).

The liminality of this position can be seen in the apparent contradiction that, on the one hand, activists follow the rules of formal participation while, on the other hand, also neglect them and their underlying principles. Individual experiences of injustice and collective discourses of antagonism from which the activists and the collective movement gain an identity are possible keys to understanding this constellation (Mouffe, 2013). Such an identity can only be maintained by constantly referring to the shared feelings of injustice that activists draw on to legitimize their boundary crossing (Pitti et al., 2021).

Liminality refers to the relationship between opportunities and limitations of public and institutional recognition. At the same time, it also seems to be related to a project of expansion in which moving into and occupying positions ‘in-between’ allows the activists to formulate goals that provide collective identity, coherence, and agency. Interpreting youth participation in radical right movements as liminal thereby emphasizes the dynamics of the movement, rather than stability and a fixed position. It underscores rather the conflictual than the harmonic potential of participation (cf. Schwanenflügel & Walther, 2022). While this implies differentiating between explicit strategies and claims, it also highlights the question of whether this kind of activism can actually be classified as non-democratic or deviant.

From this perspective, like in other cases of liminal participation, participation is less a status associated with conforming to existing norms but rather a practice that integrates different constellations of interest and identity. This seems to be the new challenge for current societies, in which diversification and globalization have transformed the vocabulary of democratic inclusion and justice (Buchholz et al., 2009).

Conclusions

This article analyses young people’s activism in radical right movements, interpreting it as a form of ‘liminal participation’ rather than categorizing it
too hastily as non-democratic or deviant participation. One argument in this respect is how young activists present themselves as victims of injustice, which they then use to legitimize transgressing the boundaries of the democratic order. This can also be seen in their attempt to balance following the norms and rules of formal participation in their positioning as ‘conservative’ while also transgressing and violating them. In line with other studies, boundaries between conventional/political/institutional and unconventional/civic/everyday practices have been revealed to be rather blurry than sharp and clear. The closer one gets, the more the practices of young people in radical right movements reveal themselves to be mixtures of recognized and non-recognized claims and practices. They emerge in complex processes of relating diverse individual experiences of injustice with collective discourses reflected in the search for recognition through activism as well as a transformation of everyday practices. Although data show an increasing legitimation of violence in expanding radical-right discourses in the public sphere, the biographical perspective reveals a diversity of constellations of moving into and identifying with an antagonistic position in a countermovement.

Interpreting these constellations as cases of liminal participation, first, gives visibility to emerging practices in which young people are active in public spaces while their practices are not recognized as ‘participation’. This reflects a normativity that not only denies the legitimacy of their claims but also their experiences of injustice while subjecting them to a better adjustment to society and to the right ways of participating. Second, applying this concept to youth participation emphasizes that engagement is a dynamic process and that practices of participation are in constant transformation, involving conflicting interests and meanings for different actors.

Taking into consideration the limited sample size, generalization can by no means be representative but can help formulate hypotheses for analysing such activism as an experience of politicization and an expression of participation. This does not imply neglecting that both claims and practices aim to exclude other groups from power and recognition and that this clearly contradicts a wide consensus of democratic principles. While such forms of liminal participation represent a backlash to liberal scripts, they can also be interpreted as a product of limitations and exclusive boundaries of liberal orders revealing the antagonism that characterizes unequal societies and which they are increasingly unable to conceal. In sum, following radical democracy Rancière (1999) or Laclau and Mouffe (2001), conflict and dissensus need to be seen more as a constant challenge rooted in the democratic principles of equality and inclusion than as a mere expression of deviance. They thus need to be interpreted as a clear sign that under conditions of diversification and globalization as well as persisting (or even increasing) inequality, the
limitations of institutionalized forms of democracy are becoming more visible and require new forms of inclusion and recognition.

Acknowledgements

I would like to add an acknowledgment to the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) and the Coordination of Superior Level Staff Improvement (CAPES) who supported the funding of the project and the open access of the publication.

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