

Second Report on Good Practices Center for European Studies ActEuR Jean Monnet Module

Human rights activists: practicing “mild courage”

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1. Premise

As claimed in the first **First Report on Good Practices**¹ by the staff of the Jean Monnet Module *Activating EU Rights* (ActEuR), one of its main objectives is to actively engage civil society representatives in a discussion of the potential and limitations of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights in order to bring out their good practices at the local and national levels. This is a cross-cutting objective of all ActEuR JM Module activities. “Activating rights” is its main objective. In other words, it is to: a) establish a space of reflexivity in which to bring out the needs of civil society actors in their indispensable work of defending fundamental rights and, above all, b) understand how they encounter the European dimension in the actions they put in place. Indeed, one of the main difficulties accompanying the process of constitutionalization of EU fundamental rights is to make the European dimension of rights effective.

The First Report brought to attention the results of **an empirical research** conducted by questionnaire on the main difficulties that local civil society actors encounter in putting into practice a European dimension of fundamental rights.

This **Second Report** represents a qualitative deepening of the themes that emerged from the research. It focuses on **what it means to “be an activist today.”**

The report is designed as a working document, useful for keeping track of the transformations that are taking place in activist experiences directed toward the protection of fundamental rights.

Below, we provide two tracks. The first is the transcript of a public talk given by Emanuele Russo, president of Amnesty International Italy, at the second annual cycle of seminars organized by the Jean Monnet Module and entitled “*The EU Charter of Fundamental Rights in Practice: Open Lectures*”.²

The second track consists of an interview conducted with two Amnesty International activists working in the offices of the cities of Potenza and Salerno (Italy); thus, in the territory on which the University hosting the Jean Monnet ActEuR Module is located. Only the part of the interview concerning the origin and significance that the two

¹ Center for European Studies, ActEuR Jean Monnet Module (2023), *Fundamental Rights of the European Union and Good Practices*, University of Salerno (IT), DiSPS. Available at: www.centrostudieuropei.it/acteur

² Please, visit the web page: <https://www.centrostudieuropei.it/acteur/modulo-jean-monnet-2023/jean-monnet-lectures-2023-2/>.

activists attribute to their engagement in the field of human rights at the local level has been reported.

From both texts, the profound transformations that are affecting the experience of activism in historical perspective and at the local level emerge, because of, for example, digitization and the pandemic from COVID-19.

2. Practicing “mild courage”

Speech by Emanuele Russo (President of Amnesty International Italy) at the cycle of seminars organized by the Jean Monnet Module “The EU Charter of Fundamental Rights in Practice: Open Lectures” - 2nd Edition 2023.

The concept of “**human rights activism**” is often somewhat left to the **purely experiential dimension and thus risks becoming insufficient** because many of us have approached social or political activism driven by personal experiences that might even have been fleeting at the time the decision was made, without reasoning about the specific reasons why we decide to activate within our society.

The risk is that at the first difficulties **this activism is abandoned**. This is an understandable occurrence, but it could be mitigated if there were constantly pathways of reasoning about the meaning of mobilization. This sense must be **apart from the hope of achieving tangible and permanent results and successes** over the course of one’s experience of activism.

To date, why does it make sense to talk about human rights activism? After World War II, we are perhaps at the point where the gap between the implementation of policies consistent with human rights and their practical application at the global level is greatest. Bobbio in 1992 when he published “*L’età dei diritti*” said “the problem of human rights has ceased to be a theoretical, philosophical problem. One should no longer ask what human rights are, whether they are fundamental or not, but the problem is how to defend human rights.” The end of World War II is the moment when the real attempt begins after five centuries of European wars to get out of the dimension of continuous contrast within our continent. The success of the dimension of the political reading of human rights is substantiated in the denial that Pinochet makes when international public opinion brings him face to face with the massacres that took place in Santiago.

Fundamental rights have been recognized or disavowed in several categories. The first fundamental right is the recognition of a person to be one. For example, **women** were deprived of access to political rights because they were not considered totally

persons. Pinochet is trying to do a totally anti-historical operation from a political point of view, and the same discourse is seen roughly throughout the 1990s, it would not have been possible to achieve the entry into force of the Treaty of Rome if the idea of human rights had not become valid regardless of the ratification of **international human rights treaties**. This kind of path was made possible by an ongoing effort that was made within our continent to try to pursue a policy of total recognition of human rights that was increasingly structured and articulated to the extent that it proved that a new world order was possible.

I proposed the theme of **courage** in this seminar because **we, Europeans, have become somewhat disabused of considering courage as a proper dimension of our political and daily actions**; we live in one of the safest contexts at the planetary level. We are within established democracies which has led us to **forget the need to add a component of courage to our political action** because all in all we don't need it or we believe we don't need it. When we are concerned with human rights, we are carrying out an opposition to an ideological system that is predominant today. Amnesty international in 1961 sparked a new way to mobilize, promoting a movement of people centered on international solidarity because it believed that through international public awareness of human rights violations and through peaceful but systematic and organized mobilization, human rights violations could be curtailed. This kind of engagement was possible for ordinary people because **the power of mobilization came from the group of people and not from the individual**. One of the rules Amnesty international had was that every activist should not research or mobilize for violations that occurred in his or her own country. That way, even in countries with limited democracies, people could still care about other countries without risking being caught.

Mild courage is the kind of activism, association, push for change, social and human rights protection that is built in an organized form to enable people to mobilize without having to risk on their own skin the consequences of the action of a state that becomes progressively more oppressive. What is the great weakness of such a movement, which was only partly there in 1960 but which we are now experiencing? First, the fact that there must be many people, that is, there must be more and more people mobilizing, because **it is the critical mass that protects the individual**. The second reason for weakness, which we are now experiencing in part, is the progressive precarization of the world of work. In 1961, this movement, which originated in the United Kingdom but nonetheless spread mainly within Western Europe and the United States, proposed a mode of activism within a population that lived in countries that were booming economically, with jobs that tended to be stable and then saw very high levels of employment and therefore left enough free time to be able to allow these people to mobilize within a protected

situation. **That kind of context no longer exists.** We are increasingly being pushed to mobilize within **an increasingly precarious system**, so the people who can afford to do a type of mobilization, a type of activism, that still characterizes the majority of organizations, is greatly diminishing. **This is weakening the ability of movements to protect people.** We are seeing a progressive growth of organizations and a progressive systematic weakening of movements. This is why we need to engage in **finding new forms of activation, of mobilization**, that will allow us to disentangle ourselves within what is a completely changed framework that, however, our civil society organizations have not yet been able to find. We see how at the European level we are unable to offer, for example, protection for the women demonstrating in Warsaw or the people being massacred in Budapest, let alone what is happening in Russia. There are thrusts of civil society that even go against itself. All the proposals that are made for example to prevent Russian filmmakers from showing up at the film festival, or Russian artists from being able to move or even sportsmen. To go and blame a civil society that is already being massacred, journalists that are already being persecuted, in my opinion is not right. What we see in a worrying way is **the gradual inability of civil society to be able to organize itself in a structured way to provide that kind of protection in a context even in Europe that is becoming more and more “normally dangerous.”** We talk about mild courage to reason about the problematic scenario in Europe. We citizens have become so accustomed to the quiet dimension of not needing constant political activism, but **this kind of commitment is becoming more and more necessary.** However, it remains a commitment that we can afford to exercise at this time, because it is still possible for us to be courageous in an organized way in our European context. What was described in Brecht’s most overblown quotes is coming true. We have now arrived at a historical era in which **positioning toward an event becomes solely an opinion.** So, what we are seeing right now is a very complex, articulated and deliberate process that will become increasingly uncontrollable, but which has been decided by people who have built **social networks** on the basis of certain algorithms, the workings of which we even now are not able to totally understand, but which directly affect our political and democratic choices. There is no longer an acceptance of what human rights are and their centrality from a philosophical point of view.

What is needed today is to realize that the ‘mild courage’ that leads to mobilization, of ‘mild’ has only the will to consistently pursue the struggle for certain values. We are mild because the nonviolent must be the defenders of human rights. The key point today is the fact of a clear consequentiality between disregarded human rights and **the need for rebellion**, and we are progressively approaching that point, still having the opportunity to promote mild courage. So, we see the consequences more and more around us. To have politics do its job, to decongest the world of terror, to create

those values that make it possible to reconcile negative thinking about the state of the world and humanity with positive action, to understand that this approach points to the creation of a universalism in which we can all recognize ourselves, and to ensure that the values that have led the world to destruction do not have to incur the same fate. **This is the perfect definition of 'mild courage'.**

2. Growing through human rights activism

Interview with the head of the Potenza Group (Rosanna) and the head of the Salerno Group (Alessio) of Amnesty International Italy

Question: *How did you become activists?*

Rosanna: To become activists, the path started almost immediately, from a desire precisely to become active. Before I joined Amnesty International and founded the group in Potenza, I was and still am part of a university student association committed to raising awareness for the discovery of the truth for Giulio Regeni. So, my activism was born out of that commitment and then grew with the goal of having a human rights culture developed locally in a widespread way. So, I tried together with others to raise awareness in my city, in the squares, as well. The important thing is to get active. I am currently in charge of the Amnesty Group in Potenza. However, I am curious to hear Alessio's experience as well.

Alessio: I started in 2015. I have a predominantly legal background, and I have always enjoyed delving into issues related to international law. Hence, initially, I developed an interest in the American section of Amnesty International (because they advertise better...) and so I was already following Amnesty's activities a lot by signing petitions. Then I learned about a training course advertised by the Salerno City Council section through the *Informagiovani* Office. Also with the desire, I tell you the truth, to change my friendships and acquaintances a bit, I enrolled in this course. From there it started a little bit, I started to get passionate also because I met a very good person who trained us. Later, on that basis, we founded the Salerno group of Amnesty that had disbanded years before. Slowly then we grew. At first, no one knew us and there was a lot of distrust of us. Then, we personally grew as a capacity, and we learned to make ourselves better known. Now we are a very large Salerno network, and we are constantly being asked so much that we can't keep up with all the initiatives. I mean, we have been able to become activists and do quite a few things. Even personally, I

have received several assignments both at the local level, where I serve as treasurer of the Salerno section, and at the regional level. I was placed in the “development and activism” group, so I do reception and training. Currently, I am a constituency liaison for fundraising. I have acquired in this way many skills that have allowed me to move more smoothly in the working world. I work as a practicing lawyer and as a social planner for associations.

Question: What does “being an activist” mean to you? How has the meaning you attach to it changed over time? Obviously if there have been changes.

Rosanna: I leave this answer to Alessio because he has certainly been in Amnesty longer. For me, being an activist means being active every day for human rights and, in particular, engaging in the field of rights education in schools, which is what I am involved in. In schools you can see how especially children have great empathy for these issues and can distinguish very well between “the good” and “the bad.” Even on the death penalty, for example, no child I have spoken to in schools has ever told me that the death penalty is a right thing. That gives us great hope for a better future. Here, for me “being an activist” means above all to have this hope.

Alessio: I subscribe to what Rosanna says. Selfishly, being an activist for Amnesty has also allowed me to delve into issues I didn't know about, which is useful for study. I did a dissertation in international law, so the Amnesty experience was very useful for me. Regarding the question about how activism has changed, there are two profiles to highlight. The first concerns the tools through which we practice activism. For example, we used to do a lot of “signature gathering” through paper documents, now we work online. This is something on which there has been a huge revolution. Then, the huge revolution was the pandemic. Before the pandemic, everything was done in presence. Now, although we are no longer in the midst of the pandemic, a lot of meetings with activists are done online. A lot of training is done online, which did not exist before. This has also had a positive implication. We also do training at the national level, and before it was possible to do less, because of time or cost. Now we do training a little bit online and a little bit in-person. Another aspect with respect to which activism is evolving is that before activism consisted of doing training, collecting signatures, now activism is becoming much more “digital,” in the sense of creating projects that take advantage of the potential of the Internet and the Web. One example is the “hate barometer,” which consists of monitoring hate speech on social media. These new forms of activism that have been created through digital allow for more things to be done at the same time and to reach even younger people, such as myself.