# 4 Images of democracy in the eyes of arts students

***"Studying politics today should be compulsory. I can't spend two years studying prehistory and one month studying current politics"***

## Chapter ID

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**Summary:** In Catalonia, Spain, an activity put in relation testimonies of people who lived through Francoism (1939-1975) and the transition to democracy (1975-1981) with some twenty young art students, who then had to capture their reflections in a sketchbook. The experience allowed to assess the extent to which listening to testimonies of people who lived through an autocratic regime can foster a change in perceptions towards democracy.

## 1. Introduction

Do we learn from the experiences of previous generations? To what extent are we influenced by the experiences of previous generations, and to what extent do we need to generate our own experiences and meanings?

"Learning from the past" is a widespread maxim in the social sciences, and it is especially relevant when talking about dark pasts, such as wars or undemocratic periods. However, is it possible to learn from the past from other people's experiences, or is it necessary to have our own life experiences that bring us closer to meaning?

The research presented in this chapter took place in Catalonia, Spain. The researcher worked with young art students to consider testimonies of people who lived through Francoism (1939–1975) and the transition to democracy (1975–1981). In total, 23 students from the La Massana Arts and Design centre in Barcelona listened to the oral testimonies of three people who lived through Francoism and the Transition (known in Spanish as La Transición), as a basis for reflecting on the achievements and limitations of the emergence of democracy in Spain. The students captured their reflections in a sketchbook.

The overall aims were twofold: to assess the extent to which listening to testimonies of people who lived through an autocratic regime can foster a change in perceptions of democracy, and to identify which factors have a greater or lesser influence on this change in perception.

## 2. Methodology

The research followed the parameters discussed in detail in Table 1.

**Table 1: Summary of research characteristics**

| | |
|---|---|
| **Why** | This research aims to put this into practice and analyse the impact of oral testimonies in raising awareness of historical events. |
| **What** | The research considered a set of linked questions: To what extent can the viewing of testimonies about the dictatorship and the transition to democracy influence listeners, and in what ways? What methodological and contextual factors may have conditioned this influence? |
| **Who** | The following people took part: 23 students from the La Massana School of Arts, their two art teachers, the author of this chapter and, indirectly, the witnesses featured in the three testimonies. |
| **When** | The activities with the students took place between October 2023 and June 2024, in a sporadic fashion and integrated into the school year. The research was carried out during the same period and in the three months following. |
| **Where** | La Massana School of Arts (a school for artistic baccalaureate and higher-level vocational training) in Barcelona, Catalonia, Spain. |
| **How** | The qualitative research involved observation of the activities, two group discussions (*n*=21 and n=21/21 students), one focus group (3 students) and analysis of 15 student sketchbooks.<br>The sources of information were therefore the notes and recordings of the activities carried out in the classroom, and the drawings in the sketchbooks handed in by the students. |
| **What for** | To draw methodological conclusions about how to make the most effective use of testimonies for social science education, and specifically for citizenship education. |

## 2.1 Why: on democratic health, citizenship and (ant)agonisms

The concerns that gave rise to this research stemmed from observations of the rise of populism, the decline in electoral and civic participation, increasing polarisation, and growing support for extreme right-wing parties (in general, and especially among groups aged under 25) in Europe, including Spain.

From a historiographical point of view, it is often considered that teaching about dictatorial or undemocratic contexts allows us to learn from the past and not to repeat such regrettable historical events. However, as authors such as Anna Cento Bull and Hans Lauge Hausen critically reflect, the antagonistic and cosmopolitan[1] memories that are more often promoted in Europe – usually excessively Manichean (in the case of antagonism) and often ignoring the nature of the conflict (in the case of cosmopolitanism) – may be contributing to populism, racism and fundamentalism.[2]

The researcher collected three life stories of ordinary people who lived through Francoism and the Transition, with the intention of providing a non-Manichean and multiperspectival view that could overcome antagonism. In addition, a learning space was created for students to experience what happens when they listen to the life stories of people who defend democracy as a system while at the same time identifying its limitations, regardless of their ideology.

## 2.2 What: how can listening to testimonies about Francoism and the Transition affect perceptions of democracy?

One of the hypotheses of this research was that learning from testimonies about the dictatorship and the Transition – when the testimonies provide sufficiently plural and nuanced views – can be an effective way of learning from the past that transforms points of view about present-day democracy in Spain. Without assuming this hypothesis to be valid, the research aimed to analyse the extent to which viewing testimonies about the dictatorship and the Transition can affect listeners' appreciation of democracy, to identify the most significant lessons learned, and to understand what methodological and contextual factors may have conditioned this influence.

The testimonies depicted the experiences of two men and one woman who lived through the Franco regime (for 32, 23 and 27 years respectively). Although the witnesses came from families with different ideologies (one of them pro-Franco), the testimonies themselves were mostly critical of the dictatorship, so the points of view provided limited diversity. In that sense, because the testimonies did not include the point of view of a perpetrator, they cannot truly be said to fulfil the requirements to be considered agonistic memories,[3] instead broadly corresponding with a cosmopolitan point of view.

In summary, the research questions considered for this chapter were: To what extent did viewing testimonies about the dictatorship and the Transition influence students' perceptions of democracy? How did the students relate to stories about dictatorship or democracy? To what extent did their own characteristics (age, gender, class, degree of politicisation, ideology, values, etc.) condition their view of democracy? To what extent were the testimonies decisive in these reflections? What didactic factors favoured or hindered the influence of the testimonies on the students' reflections?

## 2.3 Who: participants

The main group participating in the research consisted of 23 students. Of these, 13 identified as women, 4 as men and 6 as non-binary. They were between 18 and 25 years old, and some of them came from or had parents originally from other countries (Argentina, China and France). The research considered whether their characteristics – gender, age and origin, among others – were reflected in the drawings they provided in their sketchbooks. It was possible that, as a group, the students could have had an ideological bias towards left-wing values, [4] given that they were art students.

In addition to the students, two teachers at the La Massana school of arts, both men, also took part. One of them had lived through the Franco regime until he was nine years old. The second had lived through it for barely a year. Their role mostly consisted of providing the students with instructions for the drawing task. However, the teacher who had lived under the Franco regime for nine years offered a few critical comments on the regime.

The author of this chapter, who did not directly experience Francoism, played the dual role of facilitator of activities and researcher. She is a researcher at the Escola de Cultura de Pau (School for a Culture of Peace) at the Autonomous University of Barcelona and specialises in tackling controversial issues. Although her family was mainly pro-Franco, with a grandfather and uncle who were members of the military that sustained the regime, she tends towards having anti-Franco bias (and at the same time a predisposition to engage in dialogical exchanges in an agonistic mode). Her role was essentially participant observation, in the sense that she did not limit herself to data collection and analysis, but also promoted the initiative in the art school and facilitated the occasional discussion session. This allowed for a better degree of (participant) observation, although at the same time this implies a greater risk of bias in the analysis.

## 2.4 When: stages of implementation

The preparation stage lasted from June to October 2023. It involved selecting people from whom to collect testimonies, recording their life stories, identifying a group of students with whom to carry out the experiment, negotiating with the teachers, editing the testimony videos and planning the activities with the students.

The activities with the students – including an initial training session and discussion, the students' independent work, the presentation of their reflections in drawings, and a focus group – took place between October 2023 and June 2024, during the school year. The research was done in parallel (during the same period as the school activities) and in the three months following.

## 2.5 Where: the Spanish and Catalan context

The research took place in Spain, a country that faced civil war (1936–1939) between the Republican and the National sides, and a dictatorship (1939–1975) where the Nationals ruled. The fact that those names are not opposites (e.g. republicans/monarchists or Spanish nationalists/plurinationalists) shows how several groups overlapped in the two main blocs. In brief, the Nationals were right-wing Spanish nationalists and monarchists, while the Republicans were left-wing plurinationals and republicans (including anarchists). These cleavages persist today in updated forms. While the dimension of the republican/monarchist split is not known because very few data are published about support for the

monarchy, research considers the left/right split to be more polarising than the Spanish nationalist/plurinationalist/non-nationalist split.[5]

The transition to democracy in Spain, starting in 1975, focused more on amnesty than on truth, reparations, reconciliation or memory. Transitional justice was not officially addressed until the Historical Memory Law was passed in 2007, more than three decades after Franco's death, and the topic remains controversial. In fact, many consider that in Spanish society, learning from the past is not just controversial but taboo, especially in teaching. How people remember the dictatorship has changed over time, with differences also existing between regions and contexts: as some argue, "within a broad cosmopolitan frame, it is possible to detect traces of agonism".[6] Indeed, as some researchers highlight, "the Catalan memory culture might be more antagonistic (Spain as an oppressor) than the Spanish one, mostly preoccupied with the recuperation of the memory of the victims".[7]

More concretely, this research study took place in Catalonia, a territory in which anti-Franco spirit predominated (although the three testimonies were from people who had migrated from other regions of Spain). As the account of the activities with these students will show (see Figure 2 below), it is important to note that seven years earlier, an uprising in favour of Catalan independence had taken place, including a symbolic referendum launched by civil society and declared illegal by the Spanish government. The school-based activities took place in Barcelona, although two of the witnesses and some of the students lived in different cities. The La Massana School of Arts is part of the Autonomous University of Barcelona. The teachers who agreed to the initiative were convinced that a public educational institution must fulfil a social function.

### 2.6 How: summary of the activities

The research had an essentially qualitative approach, oriented towards understanding the construction of meaning, although mixed methods were used for the analysis.

The collection of information involved observing the initial learning activity (image theatre exercises and a debate following the viewing of the testimonies on the dictatorship) (23 students); analysing the students' drawings, together with their presentation and justification of their drawings (*n*=15); and a focus group (*n*=3). Although a focus group (taking the form of a semi-structured interview) was planned from the beginning of the research, it was revealed to be particularly appropriate when it was realised that the students had barely reflected on the testimonies in their drawings. Seven students were pre-selected together with the teachers to participate in the focus group, according to criteria based on diversity (both less and more politicised people), but only three students actually participated in the discussion, all of them with the most politicised profile.

The sources of information were therefore the students' drawings; notes and transcribed recordings of the activities carried out in the classroom (in October 2023 and January 2024); the 15 sketchbooks handed in by the students, with more than 150 drawings (created in May and June 2024); and the transcription of the focus group discussion (which took place in June 2024).

The information was analysed using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. The drawings, the presentations and the focus group were initially analysed qualitatively. The information from these three sources was analysed through classroom observation, discourse analysis of their interventions during the sessions and analysis of the drawings of the sketchbooks. At the same time,

in order to minimise possible biases in the analysis, all of this information was collected in an Excel file that included the personal characteristics of each student (age, gender, origin, social class if specified by the student, degree of politicisation and ideology if specified) alongside transcripts of their oral contributions and their drawings.

The themes to be analysed were defined inductively, based on the analysis of the transcripts and drawings. They are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2: Themes used for the qualitative analysis**

| Focus of analysis | Description |
|---|---|
| Perception of democracy and the political system | Perception of the degree of dictatorship/democracy where the students live or lived, in Spain or other countries. |
| | Perception of the system of representative democracy in Spain, and of the role of politicians. |
| | Social and economic benefits or challenges that policy is, or is not, able to address. |
| | Factors impeding politicisation. |
| Meaning-generation process | References to the influence of the testimonies in students' reflections on democracy and the Transition. |
| | References to articles, podcasts and other sources of information that students had used for further information. |
| | References to the influence of schooling on students' reflections. |
| | Politicisation through family or friends. |
| | Aspects of identity (age, sexual orientation, class consciousness, etc.) that influence politicisation and perceptions of democracy. |

The various sources of information were compared to ensure correct interpretation of the students' meanings: images from the sketchbooks, the students' oral presentations about their work, and (in the case of the focus group participants) the students' additional reflections.

## 2.7 For what: changing changing democracies

Starting from the observation that European democracies are changing (the "changing democracies" of the project title), this research aimed to look at how to change these more dysfunctional aspects of democracy, using a play on words (changing changing democracies) that is intended to move from observation to action.

Specifically, the research aimed to assess to what extent oral testimonies about people who have lived through non-democratic regimes can influence young people's views on democracy and their political behaviour. Understanding the degree of influence these testimonies had will allow conclusions on how to use them more effectively in social science education, and specifically in citizenship education.

## 3. The educational activities

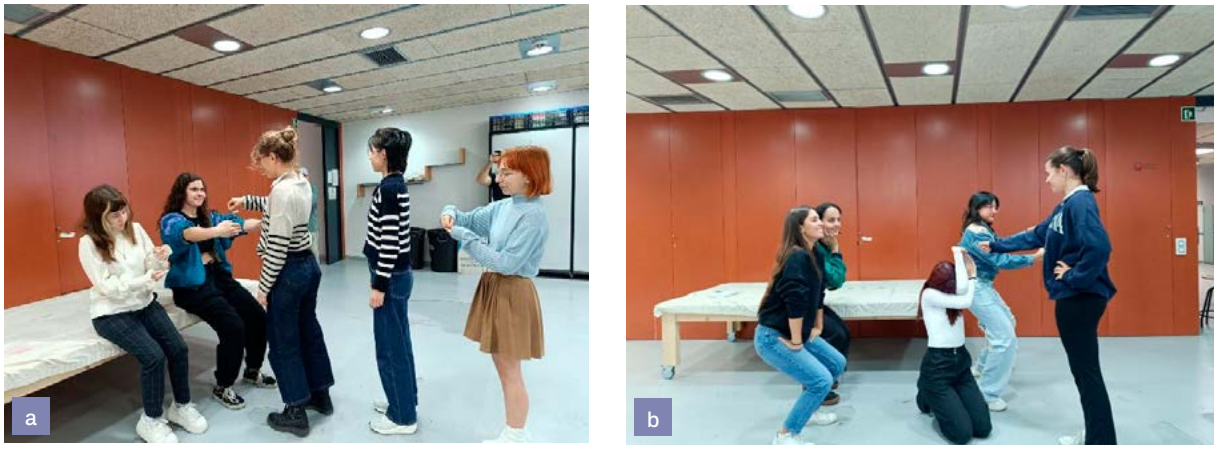
The classroom activities took place across two sessions: a first one in which the students listened to the testimonies and discussed them, and a second one in which the students presented their thoughts on their process of reflection on democracy.

### 3.1 Session 1: what are your experiences of democracy?

The interaction with students began with a two-hour session in which the Changing Democracies project was introduced, along with its objectives of educating people on the value of – and encouraging to reflect on the limits of – democracy today, based on testimonies from different countries that have experienced different kinds of non-democratic situations (left-wing, right-wing and colonial regimes).

Secondly, in order to connect the topic with their previous experiences and knowledge, the students were asked to carry out a "image theatre" exercise in four groups.[8] Two groups reflected on their own positive experiences of the proper functioning of democracy, and two groups reflected on their own negative personal experiences linked to deficiencies in the current democracy. The images relating to the proper functioning of democracy had to do with the holding of free elections (Figure 1a) and public services (Figure 1b). Those relating to its malfunction had to do with the repression of a civil society attempt in 2017 to hold a referendum on whether Catalonia should be independent of Spain, which was declared illegal and repressed by the police (Figure 2).[9]

**Figure 1: Positive personal experiences of the smooth functioning of today's democracy**




(a) One group showed the act of voting.

(b) Another showed the use of public transport, as an example of public services.

**Figure 2: Negative personal experiences due to the shortcomings of today's democracy**

Both groups show the unofficial (and unauthorised) referendum in Catalonia on 1 October 2017, which asked citizens to vote on the independence of Catalonia and where police repressed the electorate at numerous polling stations.

Although three out of the four images relate democracy to the possibility (or impossibility) of voting, the discussions following the image theatre exercise had more depth. The students mentioned aspects such as polarisation, the role of the media, fear of the rise of the extreme right and so on.

Thirdly, a video was shown containing fragments of the three testimonies. The three witnesses were Ovídia Sánchez, a woman originally from the Andalusia region who worked in factories and as a domestic worker and participated in 'neighbourhood movements'; Mariano Royo, from La Rioja region, a male teacher in a private school during the Franco regime and in a public school during the Transition; and Andrés Ruiz, from the Andalusia region, who had held various jobs and been imprisoned for two years for his anti-Franco militancy. To contextualise the video, the three testimonies were presented, highlighting that the witnesses' family backgrounds were ideologically different (one pro-Franco, two anti-Franco), although it should be noted that the ideas reflected in the video were not so diverse (all of the witnesses had left-wing ideas). The video then presented an 11-minute montage of their answers to three questions.

The first question – "Did we live better with/against Franco?"[10] – prompted personal anecdotes about the witnesses' lives during the dictatorship. Two explained that they had experienced propaganda on some subjects and punishments at school, and one had been able to attend school for only one year due to poverty. They had also experienced other prohibitions and censorship, such as police persecution in the streets for *saltos* ("jumps" – speedy actions where participants handed out pamphlets, as demonstrations were prohibited).

The second question – "How do you evaluate the Transition?" – prompted the witnesses to assess the Transition. Negative evaluations included how the same people (including families) held power for long periods (e.g. in the judiciary, police, army and government) and economic inequalities. Positive evaluations included the achievement of the right to vote and more democratic forms of organisation.

The third question – "What now?" – prompted reflections on future difficulties for young people, and the lack of participation of young people in demonstrations and campaigns for social rights.

After the students had watched the video, a new debate was opened to enable them to share their reactions and reflections. There was a lot of discussion about rights, in light of a testimony explaining that in Franco's time people were not allowed to kiss or hold hands in the street (not even heterosexual couples). There were also reactions to a witness who deplored the fact that her grandson had never gone to a demonstration. In the debates, some students criticised the extreme right, and in some cases the right. Some, probably less politicised, remained silent, although the researcher attempted to encourage dissenting opinions through some questions. Although it was not an objective of the activity, some students entered into a left–right debate.

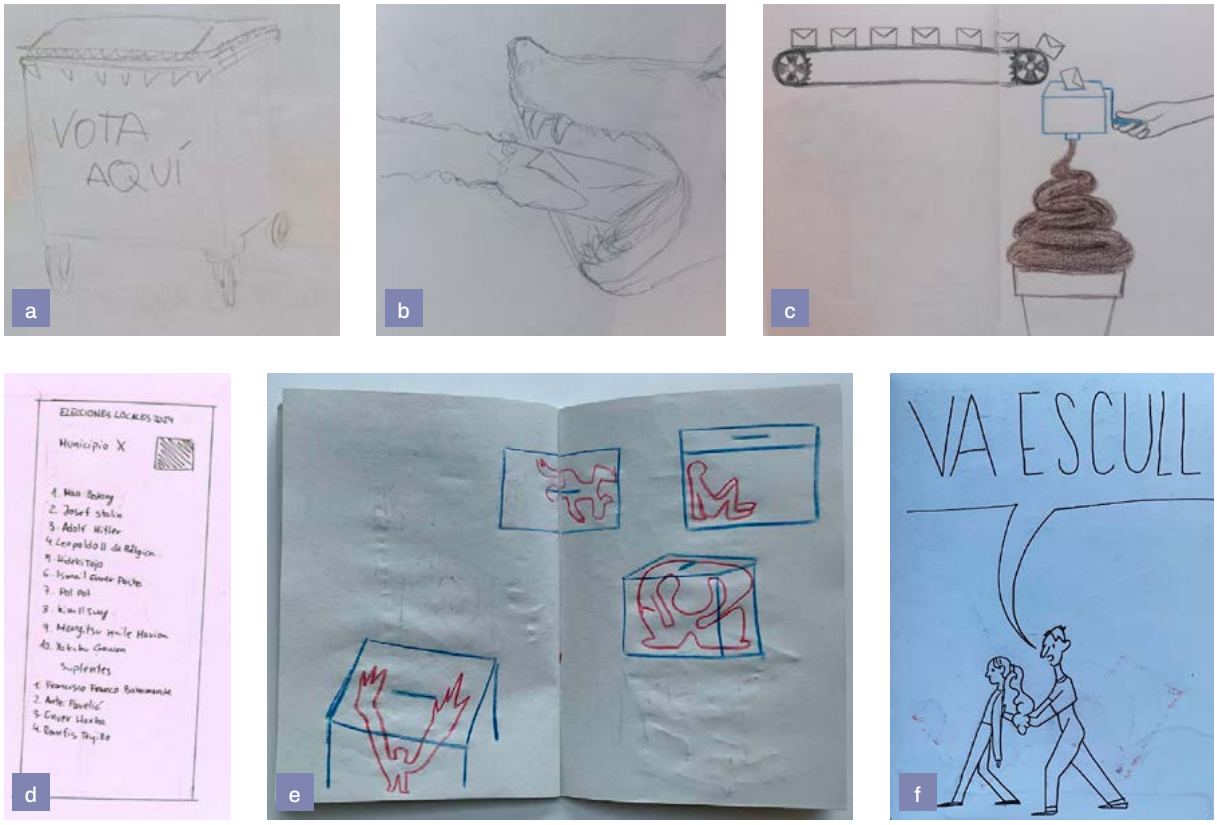
At the end of the session, the students were given instructions on their next task (which they would carry out outside the sessions). They were asked to produce a sketchbook to express their reflections on democracy after watching the testimonies and thinking further about them. They were not asked to produce finished drawings but instead to capture their entire creative and reflective process, with a view to presenting their drawings, to the group in the second session. To facilitate their assimilation of the contents of the video, the students were informed that it would remain available on the internet and that they could review it while preparing their work. The art teachers also provided them with some press articles and podcasts, and they were encouraged to do their own research. They were also informed that the Changing Democracies project included a research component and an exhibition, and that students who wished to participate in the exhibition with their drawings were welcome to do so.

### 3.2 Session 2: what are your reflections on democracy?

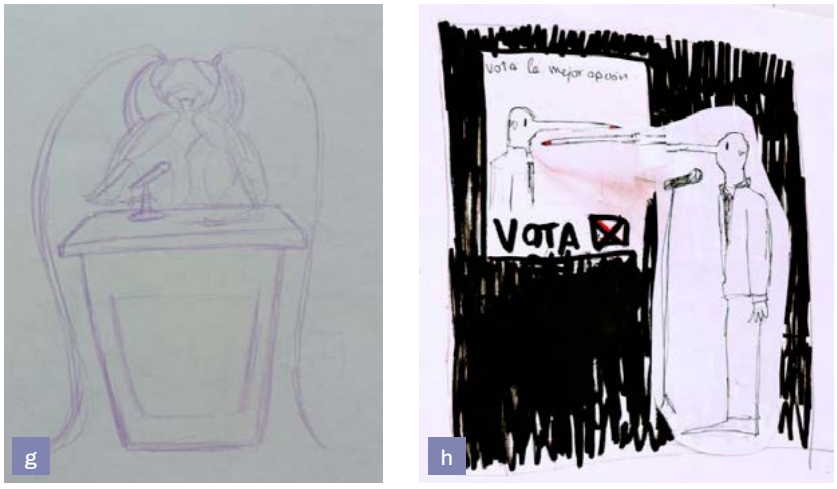
The second session took place three months after the students had viewed the testimonies. In this session, the students presented their sketchbooks, explaining the process of reflection that had led to their drawings.

In general, the students' views of democracy were rather pessimistic (Figure 3). A significant proportion of the drawings depicted politicians as liars (three students), cockroaches, clowns or bureaucrats. Drawings also represented the uselessness of voting, depicting the ballot box as a paper shredder (three students), a rubbish bin, or a process where social diversity is homogenised and grossly simplified via overly narrow political choices.

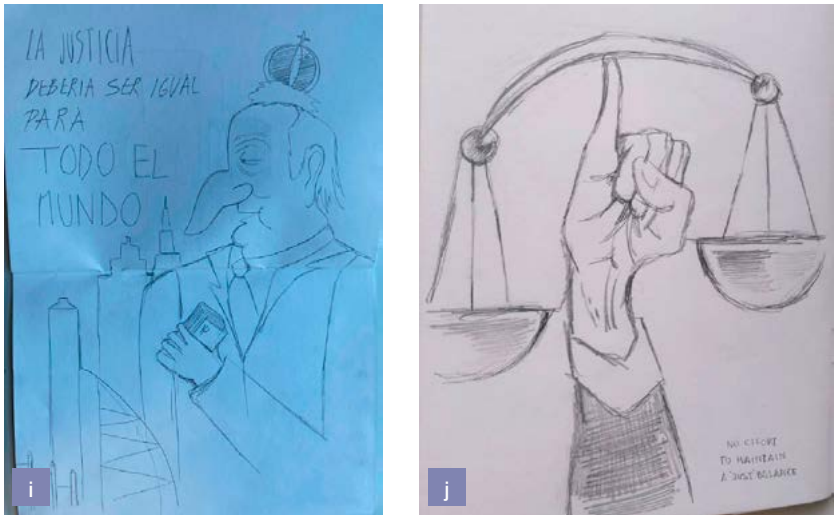
**Figure 3: Drawings with negative views of democracy**




Drawings of the uselessness of voting: (a) "vote here" in a rubbish bin (by Ismael Alcaide); (b) votes in the lion's den[11] (by Estel Soler); (c) the fate of the electorate's votes as appetising or nauseating (by Jiaying Li); (d) electoral lists with options to choose which one is worse (by Enya Garolera); (e) "trapped in the vote" (by Alba Martínez); and (f) "come on, choose" (by Aina Sans).




Drawings of politicians: (g) as cockroaches (Ismael Alcaide) and (h) as liars (Enya Garolera).




Drawings of the monarchy and judiciary: (i) "justice should be equal for everyone" – a comment on the privileges of the monarchy (by Nora Zapata) and (j) "No effort to maintain a just balance" (by Clodette de Felipe).

Several drawings identified democracy as being at risk (one drawing explicitly contained the phrase "Democracy at risk" and another used "Democracy is at stake"). Two others identified the risk of the resurgence of the far right (Figure 4) or suggested that the far right is an impediment to progress.

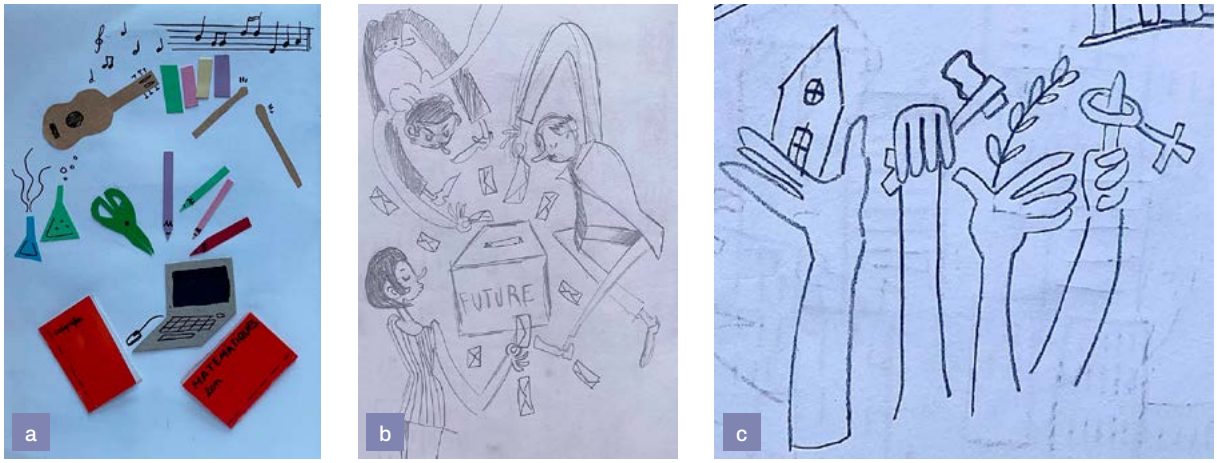
**Figure 4: Drawings of democracy at risk**


Drawings directly referencing the far right: (a) risk of history repeating itself on the far right (by Estel Soler); (b) "With the growth of the far right, our comfortable democracy is being silently threatened" (by Aspen); and (c) a static bicycle with swastika wheels with the title "Just like the old days" (by Isaac Guzmán).


Drawings commenting on restrictions on thought and speech: (d) muted citizens (by Nora Zapata); (e) "Talking about democracy and silencing the people is a farce (Ovid)" (by Bianca Rossi); and (f) "It goes in one ear and out the other" (by Aina Sans).

The rest of the students – the majority – created drawings that portrayed democracy as established – with flaws and dysfunctionalities to be resolved, but as an unshakeable reality (Figure 5).

**Figure 5: Drawings of the benefits of democracy**




(a) Democracy as access to education, culture and scientific research (by Aina Sans); (b) voting as a way of envisioning the future (by Pau Macián); and (c) the possibility of conveying political demands (by Pau Macián).

Of the 21 students who submitted drawings, most focused on representative democracy and voting, while two considered the importance of direct democracy (as a concept). Although many referred to the etymological definition ("people power") and two drew arms in the air as a representation of people power (e.g. Figure 5c), surprisingly very few drawings showed concrete strategies for direct participation, such as referendums, demonstrations or participation in grassroots organisations.

Also noteworthy is the use of metaphors, such as an eagle (a symbol of Franco's regime) fighting with a lion (a symbol of the Congress of Deputies) (Figure 6). Other drawings included images of iconic buildings, such as the White House, or American soldiers raising their flag in a foreign territory, as a representation of imperialism.

**Figure 6: Experimentation with symbolic representations to depict the struggle between democracy and dictatorship**

On the right, an eagle (Francoist symbol) attacks a lion (a symbol of the Congress of Deputies). On the left, other drawings featuring eagles (coming out of a ballot box, flying, etc.). This student also used arrows pointing upwards, part of the symbol of the Falange Española de las Juntas de Ofensiva Nacional Sindicalista, a fascist political party created in 1933, shortly before the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War (by Clodette de Felipe).

The next section explores the meanings the students gave to the testimonies and their processes of reflecting on democracy in the past and today.

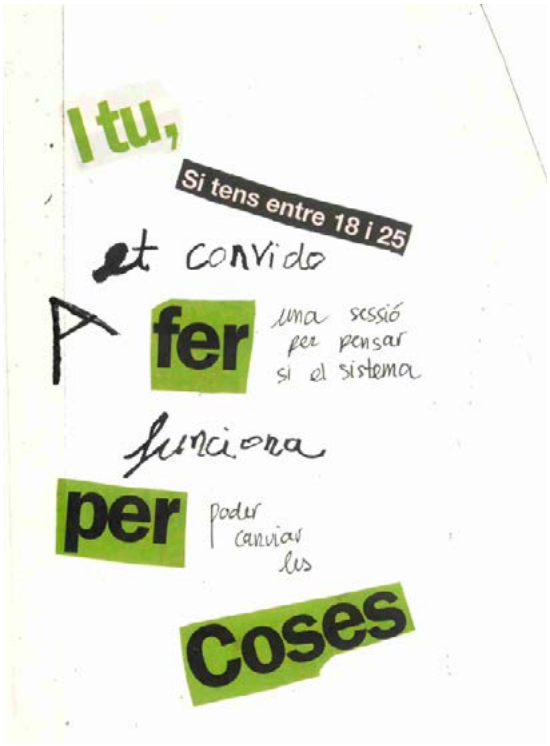
## 4. What significance did the students attach to the oral testimonies?

In addition to seeking to understand the students' perceptions of democracy, the research asked about the process of meaning construction: to what extent were the testimonies decisive, and what other factors were influential?

### 4.1 How did the students construct meaning from the testimonies?

The first observation, regarding the construction of meaning, is that seeing the testimonies did not have a significant influence on the students' conception of democracy. Although several of the drawings reflected ideas against dictatorship, only one student mentioned (in his presentation of his drawings) a reflection arising from the video, which had to do with the importance of youth participation (Figure 7).

**Figure 7: Invitation to youth participation**




*"And you, if you are between 18 and 25, I invite you to conduct a session to think about whether the system is working in order to change things"* (collage by Isaac Guzmán).
While explaning this poster, one of the drawings in his sketchbook, this student reflected that "at the end of the day, older people are already very comfortable with the progress achieved, and I think it is us young people who have to do something about it in order to change the world".

In the focus group, asked to what extent they remembered the contents of the testimonies, the students' answer was "little". Two students mentioned the testimonies' reflections on the role of young people in the defence of democracy. Indeed, the video included clips of Ovídia Sánchez lamenting that her grandson had never been to a demonstration; of Mariano Royo encouraging young people not to

be “users of democracy” but to struggle for democracy and to produce, not only consume, good for society; and of Andrés Ruiz saying people should “get off their asses” to defend their own causes. Thus, although some students were able to remember messages from the testimonies (Figure 7), the impact of the messages was not significant.

A second observation is that approximately a quarter of all of the students expressed that they were “not interested in politics”. The students’ explanations of this statement showed that this was not so much because of a lack of interest in politics – some of the students who claimed to have no interest in politics maintained elaborate arguments about the dysfunctions of the political system – but rather because of disappointment with politicians and the poor representativeness of the political system.

The lack of interest in politics was complemented by a lack of consensus on what politics is. While one student expressed her perplexity and disagreement with the statement that “everything is politics” (Figure 8a), another student denounced in his drawing (Figure 8b) the double standard around what is considered political and what is not, depending on the political interests.[12]

**Figure 8: Examples of drawings of what is (a)political**


(a) “Everything is politics?” (by Luz Ortega), showing her perplexity and wondering whether the good or bad functioning of trains is political or not. (b) “Eurovision is apolitical!” showing the Eurovision logo (the heart) containing the flag of Israel (by Ismael Alcaide).

Bearing in mind that the testimonies did not have a significant influence on the reflective process recorded in the students’ sketchbooks (see Figure 7 for the single exception), how did the students construct their meanings?

Analysis of the sketchbooks shows that the construction of meaning was based primarily on the etymology of the word “democracy” (*demos*, “people”; *cratos*, “power”) from classical Greek, rather than using more elaborate definitions of the concept . A second source of inspiration that students frequently used was quotations about democracy. Other sources included newspaper articles and podcasts as well as students’ own reflections on the shortcomings of democracy in certain countries (such as Spain, Argentina, Nicaragua and the United States).

Table 3: Summary of discussion topics and key learning points

| Topics for reflection | Testimonials | Other sources |
|---|---|---|
| Importance of the welfare state | | x |
| Obtaining civil liberties | x | |
| Youth's lack of participation | x | |
| What is political and what is not | | x |
| Existence of risks and threats to democracy | | x |
| Distractors | | x |

As shown in Table 3, the main discussion topics and learning points – discussed in the sessions and reflected in the drawings – referred to the importance of the welfare state; to the obtention of civil liberties ((in)ability to walk down the street holding hands, right to demonstrations/"jumps"); to the youth lack of participation and apathy; to what is political and what is not; to the existence of risks and threats to democracy; and to distractors (social media, too fast way of living). Two of those issues were addressed by the testimonies and remembered by some students.

## 4.2 Methodological factors

The limited influence of the testimonies on the students' reflections and drawings makes it necessary to reflect on what methodological factors acted to limit the testimonies' pedagogical usefulness. Among the possible hypotheses are that the students' exposure to the testimonies was too short, which did not allow them to develop sufficient empathy with the witnesses' life stories; that the video was not sufficiently emotional; that it did not connect sufficiently with the students' prior knowledge; and that the students accessed the testimonies through a video and not in person, potentially limiting their scope for curiosity by not allowing them to ask questions. Other hypotheses are that the video was perceived as too biased, potentially leading to its rejection; that the other materials (articles and podcasts) the students consumed dispersed the message too much; that the video did not require re-reading or re-viewing the testimonies; that the students were not required to view the testimonies more than once; (so as not to falsify the results); and that the context was an art lesson with art teachers, not a social sciences lesson, which may have influenced the direction the students' reflections took.

Some of these potential explanations were more prominent than others in the conversations with the students. In the focus group, the students identified several reasons why they had found the work challenging and why the testimonies had not been particularly influential in their elaboration of their reflections.

On a more generic level, many of the students expressed difficulties in carrying out the task, mainly due, in their own words, to not being in the habit of being required to have a formed opinion on a subject. In the words of one student, "Having an opinion makes you responsible, and people in general don't want to have more responsibility." Two students expressed that they would have liked to spend more time on the work because the exercise had provided an opportunity for introspection, "self-knowledge and personal growth". But most expressed difficulty in clarifying their views on democracy and politics. Although throughout their studies they had been asked to take a position on other social issues, such

as poverty or gender, they experienced this task as much more politicised and requiring them to take a stronger stance.

Indeed, the Spanish education system is not characterised by encouraging a critical spirit or the clarification of one's own values or personal opinions: although there is the subject of Education in Civic Values, it makes up a small proportion of the curriculum (usually, depending on the region, students undertake one class in primary school and another in secondary school)[13] and it is stigmatised as a subject of little interest, with the class time often being wasted. Although the current curriculum invites teachers to approach subjects from the perspective of controversial teaching situations that require inquiry to base subjects on controversial learning situations and subjects that require enquiry, this was not the educational framework in which this study's participants had been educated. In the social sciences, too, the cultivation of one's own opinion does not usually take centre stage. As an example, a comparative analysis of the seven main social science textbooks for (the fourth year of secondary education) in Catalonia concluded that only 4% of activities in social science textbooks asked students to debate or contribute their personal opinion (compared to 91% of activities involving reading comprehension and summarising information, 4% of those relating historical content to current events, and 1% involving action in the immediate environment, such as interviews with family members or research in the supermarket).[14] Thus, these students' lack of practice in critical thinking corresponds with the educational reality of the country.

A second reason the students found the work challenging and why the testimonies were of limited influence has to do with a lack of interest in the subject. As previously identified, the object of the reflection was demotivating for a quarter of the class, who stated that they "did not like politics" and who had represented democracy and politicians in very derogatory terms. The correlation between motivation and learning has been widely explored in the field of education.[15]

More specifically with regard to the limited influence of the testimonies, some of the arguments mentioned in the focus group suggested that there was too long a period of time between the viewing of the testimonies and the drawing task, which meant that the influence of the testimonies was blurred.

Obviously, too, the fact that the task of constructing meaning in the sketchbooks did not require the use of the testimonies was an influencing factor. However, this was a conscious decision on the part of the researcher to enable observation of the extent to which the testimonies were influential.

A third reason, which affected some students in particular, was the alleged ideological bias of the activity. In the first session, it was emphasised that the initiative was part of a European project that had collected testimonies from non-democratic systems of different types (fascist, communist and colonial) and that, although one of the people interviewed came from a Francoist family, the testimonies shown in the session over-represented left-wing ideologies. Subsequently, at the end of the first session (in which the testimonies were shown), one student expressed her discomfort at participating in the project, saying, "I don't want to participate in politics." The teachers answered that she had every right to decide not to participate in the project and that her drawings would not be analysed for this chapter, but that she had to do the drawings and present them to the class as part of the course. An attempt was made, for this research, to speak to her directly to find out more about her point of view, but she was evasive and the teachers recommended not insisting. When the other students were asked whether they considered that ideological bias could be one of the reasons for their difficulty in tackling

the project, the majority opinion was that, although they identified that there was indeed a bias in the testimonies, this had not been a determining problem for most of them but it had been for a student who was ideologically distanced from the interventions in the testimonies. These students considered that the bias was justified in the context of the subject matter, which focused on testimonies against the dictatorship in Spain.

The question of bias relates to the role of the teacher and the creation of a space of trust in which all opinions can be heard in a spirit of understanding. According to her classmates, the student who felt uncomfortable with the research project was not usually withdrawn. As such, the fact that she could not find the confidence to defend her positions and opinions suggests that the content of the testimonies was not appropriate for her, and perhaps some others. At the same time, there were indications that there was a somewhat favourable climate for giving opinions that were not aligned with either the left or the right. One student stated that she would have liked to know the dissenting opinion of the student who felt uncomfortable. Another student reflected in her sketchbook cases of a lack of democracy both in Javier Milei's Argentina (right-wing anarcho-capitalist) and Daniel Ortega's Nicaragua (autocratic left), showing that in addition to the positioning between left and right, a positioning between democracy and dictatorship is possible.

Thus, the main conclusion from the educational activities is that coming into contact with the testimonies was not enough to significantly influence the students' perceptions. Among the above hypotheses as to why the results were poor, some were confirmed and others were not. The factors that proved to be the most influential were a lack of personal opinion, not being used to taking a position, disenchantment with the subject matter addressed, too long a time lag between viewing the testimonies and carrying out the task, the lack of obligation to take the testimonies into account when carrying out the activity, and, for some students, excessive bias and/or a lack of a safe space in which to contradict the accounts of the testimonies.

### 4.3 What other factors were influential?

Given that the testimonies did not seem to have a significant influence on the students' reflections on democracy, the research explored what other factors were influential in the development – or not – of their democratic awareness.

Despite reporting a lack of interest in politics, some students indicated that their main source of information on political issues was their parents (none mentioned their grandparents), when their parents commented on current affairs. Thus, the family is a factor in students' political awareness. family seems to be an influential but not a determining factor: two of the women students who said that their contact with politics was related to their parents' politicised reflections stated that they had no interest in politics.

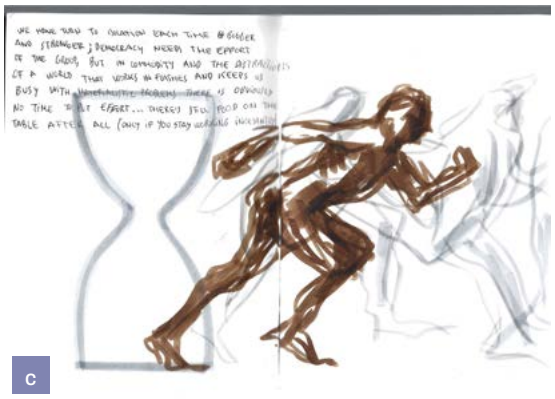
A second factor was identity – either social class or gender identity. According to some students, perceiving discrimination had given them greater political awareness. In one case, too, a student said that although he did not consider himself part of any minority, solidarity with regard to discrimination against people close to him (in this student's case, gender discrimination suffered by his mother and girlfriend) was a factor in his growing political awareness. Among other identity elements, neither age nor family origin y seemed to have been determining factors in the participants' reflections.

Unexpectedly, one factor identified by the students as not being influential was schooling. Although one student recalled discussing democracy when studying ancient Greece,[16] several students deplored the lack of contemporary political content: "Studying politics today should be compulsory. I can't spend two years studying prehistory and one month studying current politics" or "Of course you have to study history, but you also have to know about current politics!" These statements seem to reveal that, in the absence of education on the relationship between the past and the present,[17] learning about non-recent history does not seem to be sufficient for students to develop criteria for assessing the current state of democracy. Another possible explanation is that it is taken for granted that democracy today necessarily has to be deeper, more participatory and/or more equitable, and that therefore examples from the past are considered too low a standard to enable students to make judgements about democracy today.

Another factor that this research found to be significant in non-politicisation is the presence of distractors (Figure 9). The students identified a host of elements that distract people's attention and thereby reduce their political awareness. Some of these factors are the media, social networks and alienation due to work obligations.

**Figure 9: Examples of drawings of distractors**






(a) Life as a video game, alienated by money and likes (by Aina Sans);
(b) "We have to turn to isolation, each time bigger and stronger; democracy needs the effort of the group, but in commodity and the distractors of a world that works in flashes and keeps us busy with materialistic problems there is obviously no time to put effort... there is still food on the table after all (only if you stay working incessantly)" (by Aspen);
(c) "The best defense against democracy is to distract people –Noam Chomsky" (by Arlet).

In the light of these observations, what conclusions and lessons can be drawn from this experience?

# 5. Conclusions, recommendations and discussion

Reflecting on democracy, its scope and its limits, based on the testimonies of people who suffered its absence, does not seem to have been a decisive experience for the participating students.

In the classroom, their reflections were based on an invitation to identify their own experiences of democracy: two negative and two positive experiences. The testimonies, for their part, were critical of the current state of the democratic system but left no room for doubt that, for all its faults, a democratic system is preferable to a non-democratic one. Even so, the students' drawings were characterised by a very negative view of the current system in Spain (lies, lack of representativeness, etc.). The students took democracy for granted and did not perceive it to be under threat, but identified some specific factors that put it at risk (e.g. the extreme right inequality, distractors).

This chapter has pointed out possible methodological explanations for the limited effect that the testimonies had on the students' drawings and reflections: for example, too short a period of exposure (time), which did not allow enough empathy with the witnesses' life stories (emotion) and did not provide sufficient opportunity to understand them (knowledge), and also the inability to question the witnesses in person (curiosity). Some students additionally mentioned excessive bias – or insufficient confidence to question it. Among these possible explanations and others, the ones confirmed by the participants are summarised in Table 4.

The main systemic factors identified as enabling students' democratic awareness were the influence of the family in cases where parents watch and comment on the news at home, and students' identity consciousness (awareness of gender discrimination and socio-economic class, which leads to politicisation), which led them to be critical of the political system.

In contrast, the main systemic obstacles to the students' democratic awareness – and why they generally found the task of expressing their views on democracy difficult and unmotivating – turned out to be disillusionment with politics, the educational system's failure to invite them to clarify their own values and opinions, and the distractions of what Guy Debord has called the "society of the spectacle".[18]

**Table 4: Factors influencing students' democratic awareness**

| | Enabling factors | Obstructing factors |
|---|---|---|
| Systemic factors | - Politicisation through the family<br>- Identity consciousness (relating to gender or oppressed social classes) | - Disappointment with politics leading to disinterest<br>- Lack of practice clarifying their own values in the education system<br>- Distractions that make it difficult to focus on political issues (social networks, alienation, etc.) |
| Factors relating to the testimonies | - Content that has connected with their reality (e.g. testimony lamenting that the witness's grandson had never been to a demonstration) | - Too long a time between viewing the testimonies and carrying out the task<br>- No obligation to include reflections on testimonies<br>- (For some students) bias in the testimonies and/or lack of confidence in expressing dissent |

Oral testimonies played a very limited role in students' learning about an inclusive and multiperspectival concept of democracy in the research described above. The testimonies did not, in themselves, guarantee significant learning or awareness-raising. As Table 4 shows, there are systemic and methodological factors that favour and hinder democratic awareness, but contact with the testimonies did not prove to be a determining factor.

In the light of these findings, structural measures could be recommended, such as a more critically focused education system oriented towards helping students to understand today's world (not only history) and emphasising the clarification of values and how to argue one's own opinion. A further measure would be to promote the responsibility of families in the democratic awareness of their children.

Regarding the use of testimonies, the research points to some methodological recommendations. One is to ensure that the testimonies offered include ideas that young people can build on, that connect in some way with their current reality, and that allow them to understand that the topic is a historical reality that has repercussions for the present. Moreover, notwithstanding a need for more evidence in this regard, it may be important to give sufficient time to each testimony so that students have time to understand the essentials of the witness's history before listening to their ideas. This would also allow room for nuance, empathy and curiosity, and would enable the verbalisation of complex ideas so that the witnesses' statements do not seem like slogans.

As for discussions following the testimonies, it seems crucial that the conditions are in place for students to perceive that they can disagree with both the claims of the testimonies and the opinions of other students. This requires creating a trusting atmosphere in the classroom beforehand, ensuring that the testimonies show a sufficiently wide range of perspectives, and facilitating discussions by playing devil's advocate and/or giving voice to dissenting opinions in the classroom.

The experience reported here opens up questions for further research to evaluate the impact of the confrontational mode on learning. In the experience described, one student expressed a rejection of the project because of perceived excessive bias. Other students stated that, while they recognised the ideological bias, they saw it as justified because of the subject matter (transition from dictatorship to democracy). Even so, the drawings presented do not seem to show significant differences in the students' evaluation of democracy. It seems clear that the perception of ideological bias is different depending on the ideology of the person receiving the message, and that the people who perceive a greater bias in a testimony are those who are more distant from the witness's political views. The student who refused to participate in the project demonstrated a first-level agonism in the classroom,[19] as she was able to express to the teachers her discomfort with the lack of multiperspectivity of the testimonies of the witnesses who lived under Francoism and could decide not to participate fully in the project.

If the aim is to transform people's perception that democracy is a better system than dictatorship by using testimonies in an educational arena, several methodological challenges arise. The agonistic approach is the closest to multiperspectivity, and it seems the most inclusive mode to use to promote learning from the past, as it involves engaging with people who feel close to the perpetrators. At the same time, though, there is a persistent challenge in how to make perpetrators accountable. As Anna Cento Bull, Hans Lauge Hansen and Francisco Colom Gonzalez state, the agonistic mode needs to explore further how to "ensure that the understanding of the perpetrator and his or her background does not turn into

legitimation".[20] Showing understanding for perpetrators without demanding that they show a sufficient sense of responsibility could lead to rejection among people who feel close to the perpetrators' victims. In such cases, creating a safe space and encouraging the expression of a plurality of opinions might not be sufficient for a group (such as the students in this research) to regulate itself, so the question of how perpetrators are portrayed needs to be carefully balanced when testimonies are chosen.

## Endnotes

1 For explanations of the concepts of antagonistic, cosmopolitan and agonistic memory, see the introduction to this volume.

2 Cento Bull, A. & Hansen, H.L. (2016), On agonistic memory, *Memory Studies*, 9 (4), pp. 390–404.

3 According to Cento Bull and Lauge Hansen's framing, when people use agonistic memory, they "1) avoid pitting 'good' against 'evil' through acknowledging the human capacity for evil in specific historical circumstances and in the context of socio-political struggles; 2) remember the past by relying on the testimonies of both perpetrators and victims, as well as witnesses, bystanders, spies and traitors. The perspectives of the former perpetrators can provide crucial elements for understanding when, how and why people turn into perpetrators; 3) recognize the important role played by emotions and promote empathy with the victims as a first step towards remembering the past in ways that facilitate and promote critical understanding and also acknowledge civic and political passions; 4) reconstruct the historical context, socio-political struggles and individual/collective narratives which led to mass crimes being committed." People using agonistic memory must therefore incorporate the views of perpetrators in order to understand the personal and social context that led to the situation developing. See Cento Bull & Hansen, On agonistic memory-Abstract, p. 18.

4 The latest opinion polls show that the under-25 age group is characterised by a greater affinity towards the extreme right than older age groups. Even so, the fact that they were students of artistic disciplines determines a very specific profile of this age group, as observed in their interventions at the debates and in many drawings. Indeed, many comments from the participants in the sessions confirmed a tendency towards left-wing rather than right-wing ideologies. See CEO, 2023. Enquesta sobre generacions i participació. Dossier de Premsa. Centre d'Estudis d'Opinió. https://upceo.ceo.gencat.cat/wsceop/8948/Dossier de premsa_1070.pdf.

5 Miller, L. (2020), Polarización en España: más divididos por ideología e identidad que por políticas públicas, *EsadeEcPol Insight*, 18, https://www.esade.edu/ecpol/en/publications/polarisation-spain.

6 Ferrándiz, F. & Hristova, M. (2021), The production of memory modes during mass grave exhumations in contemporary Europe, in: Berger, S. & Kansteiner, W. (eds.), *Agonistic memory and the legacy of 20th century wars in Europe*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan. pp. 39–68 at p. 44.

7 Hansen, H.L., online discussion with the author during the peer-review process, October 2024.

8 Boal, A. (2002), *Games for actors and non-actors* (2nd ed.), London: Routledge.

9 In a similar workshop that took place in Barcelona in September 2024 with secondary school pupils, none of the images about the shortcomings of democracy referred to the referendum, probably due to the fact that the younger students had fewer memories of the 2017 events. Instead, several groups of students – which included a larger proportion of ethnic minority students than in La Massana group – represented how some public services (justice and education) had discriminatory practices towards immigrants.

10 In Spanish, "Con(tra) Franco vivíamos mejor?" (the sentence is open: "con(tra)", or "with/against", in order to include two points of view). "Con Franco vivíamos mejor" is a widely used phrase by those who are nostalgic for Francoism, indicating that they had a better life under Franco. "Contra Franco vivíamos mejor" is a phrase used by opposition activists to indicate they had a better life while they were mobilised against Franco. This question was added in the video as a heading for its first part, but it was not asked in this way in the interviews.

11 In Spanish, the equivalent idiom for "in the lion's den" is "in the wolf's muzzle".

12 The second session with the students took place shortly after the Eurovision Song Contest 2024, which was marked by the controversial participation of Israel. While Russia had been banned since 2023 for invading Ukraine, Israel was not banned in 2024 on the grounds that "Eurovision is apolitical" (DW, Eurovision Song Contest: Politics getting in the way of pop? (3 May 2024), https://www.dw.com/en/eurovision-song-contest-politics-getting-in-the-way-of-pop/a-68979556.

13 Decret 175/2022, de 27 de setembre, d'ordenació dels ensenyaments de l'educació bàsica, *Diari Oficial de la Generalitat de Catalunya*, 8762, 29 September 2022, https://portaljuridic.gencat.cat/ca/document-del-pjur/?documentId=938401; Ley Orgánica 3/2020, de 29 de diciembre, por la que se modifica la Ley Orgánica 2/2006, de 3 de mayo, de educación, *Boletín Oficial del Estado*, 340, 30 December 2020, pp. 122868–122953.

14 Barbeito, C. et al. (2017), *Anàlisi de la didàctica de les ciències socials des d'una perspectiva de pau (Tercer d'ESO, 2007, 2015, 2016)*, Barcelona: Institut Català Internacional per la Pau. https://escolapau.uab.cat/img/programas/educacion/Informe-llibres-de-text-3-ESO_DEFINITIU_-17-05.pdf.

15 Bueno, D. (2017), *Neurociencia para educadores. Todo lo que los educadores siempre han querido saber sobre el cerebro de sus alumnos y nunca nadie se ha atrevido a explicárselo de manera comprensible y útil.* Barcelona: Octaedro.

16 According to historian Jack Goody, considering the ancient Greeks as the inventors of democracy is a "theft of history", an ethnocentric interpretation that underestimates the importance of the Mesopotamian empire in shaping this political system. Yet this is the predominant narrative in schools. See Goody, J. (2012), *The theft of history*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

17 As mentioned above, only 4% of the activities in social science textbooks ask students to relate historical content to current affairs. See Barbeito et al., *Anàlisi de la didàctica*.

18 Debord, G. (1988), *Comments on the society of the spectacle* (M. Imrie, Trans.), London: Verso.

19 For further clarification of first- and second-level agonism, see the introduction to this volume.

20 Cento Bull, A., Hansen, H.L. & Colom Gonzalez, F. (2021), Agonistic memory revisited, in: Berger, S. & Kansteiner, W. (eds.), *Agonistic memory and the legacy of 20th century wars in Europe*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 13–38 at p. 21.