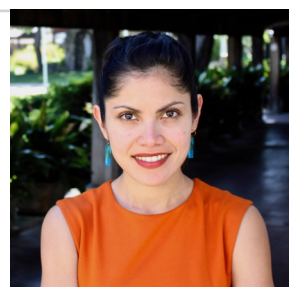


UNEARTHING THE HISTORY OF THE YOUNG EUROPEAN FEDERALIST MOVEMENT: A FULBRIGHT RESEARCH EXPERIENCE IN FLORENCE

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ABSTRACT

As a Fulbright-Schuman Scholar at the European University Institute (EUI) in Florence, Italy, I pursued research at the Historical Archives of the European Union (HAEU). I examined the Young European Federalists (YEF) movement's archival records to historicize and contextualize its sociopolitical discourses and actions in the formation of the European Union. The records reveal the relationship between past and contemporary social movements, which can help societies better understand and support youth sociopolitical development.



Keywords: Youth • Activism • Sociopolitical development • History

AN UNEXPECTED SURPRISE, A DREAM COME TRUE

When I applied for the Fulbright-Schuman Fellowship, I did not expect to be the recipient of such a prestigious award. I submitted my Fulbright application while preparing my dossier for tenure and promotion review. With hope and nervous excitement, I completed both applications. I was overjoyed and grateful when I received news that I was selected—a dream had come true!

From April to August 2025, I pursued research in Florence, Italy, as a Fulbright-Schuman Fellow at the European University Institute (EUI), specifically at the Historical Archives of the European Union (HAEU). I engaged in archival research to contextualize and understand the history of the Young European Federalists (YEF) movement, formerly the *Jeunes Européens Fédéralistes* (JEF). I studied the development of YEF from the 1950s—when it formed shortly after the signing of the Schuman Declaration—to the late 1980s. The Schuman Declaration marked an important turning point in the history of Europe. With its origins as a treaty agreement between France and Germany, the Schuman Declaration evolved into a foundational document in establishing cooperation between nation-states that constituted the European Union before it became a union. My research at the HAEU made evident the sociohistorical contextualization of the treaty, as well as the role of youth, specifically the YEF, in garnering support for European integration and collaboration. The Schuman Declaration served to restore justice, peace, solidarity, and sustainability—the pursuit of goals that are still relevant today.

Community psychology is the study of people's relationships to one another and their environments—to the communities they belong to or long for, and how these are formed. The sense of community and relationality within the YEF movement was visible in the archives I examined. YEF firmly believed that global peace could only come through the formation of a unified Europe. In reviewing multiple historical artifacts, I unearthed documents affiliated with the formation of the European Union and the role of youth in shaping it. Included in the archives were YEF members' letters to nation-state leaders, the European Parliament, and EU officials, as well as other transnational affiliates, foundations, and organizations. Also among the documents were flyers, memos, photographs, and political cartoons produced by YEF. As emerging adults, youth activists expressed an unwavering radical hope. YEF archives demonstrate this and serve as a context for understanding what motivated them in forging solidarities for global peace and transnational collaboration. My research offered insights into the passing of time through the experiences of youth calling for the formation of the European Union at a critical moment when political conflict, economic insecurity, and social tensions were surfacing in the context of the Cold War. Reviewing the archives helped me engage with the following question: *What can we learn from YEF to help support youth activists today?* Furthermore, it led me to draw important connections between the organizing and activism of YEF and today's youth-led movements.

HISTORICIZING THE YEF MOVEMENT—YOUTH ACTIVISM IN EUROPE

Historically and at present, youth activists have played a critical role in shaping political discourses. YEF made explicit their demands for global cooperation, nuclear disarmament, and international harmony. Seeing themselves as protagonists, they organized seminars, teach-ins, conferences, and direct actions across Europe to educate youth on the principles of federalism, democracy, and transnational cooperation, as well as the links between social injustices and economic inequities. Calls for a united Europe toward a more integrated world characterized YEF actions and the ideas they shared, promoted, and applied. The archives showed how their concerns for their future were rooted in their political struggles and economic uncertainties.

To bring visibility to their concerns and build their movement, YEF drew insights from the 1941 *Ventotene Manifesto*, which challenged fascism, capitalism, and war. As a movement, YEF was committed to promoting and instituting federalism as a viable solution to address political conflict, economic inequities, and discord among European nation-states brought about by the reemergence of authoritarianism. Values of democratic freedom were essential to the vision of a united Europe and YEF strongly promoted this, as evidenced in their writings:

To give people control over their own lives and to give the word “democracy” a meaning, fundamental changes are needed There needs to be created institutions capable of solving European-wide problems that have escaped the control of nation-states. There needs to be a fundamental shift of power down to the lower levels, closer to the people and to the problems. There needs to be an introduction of democracy at the place of work in order to transform the labor/capital conflict, and in the local community.

Versions of the *Manifesto*, with the goal of reaching other youth organizations, were published and disseminated widely. Fearing the rise of armed conflict, a rebirth of fascism, and divisions among nation-states competing economically and politically for power, YEF built support for transnational collaborations. By increasing their membership via the formation of chapters across cities in Europe, YEF sought to organize themselves toward the creation of a European Union.

The types of political actions, strategies, and campaigns that characterized the YEF movement were marked by collaboration, creativity, and innovation. These strategies sought to bring youth together to achieve their vision of a unified Europe. From print media to public forums, YEF leveraged a range of modalities to sustain and expand youth engagement. *Youth Forum*, a newsletter produced by YEF, featured letters, statements, petitions, and open calls for applications to annual gatherings, such as peace camps, teach-ins, rallies, and demonstrations across Europe. Creative artistic pieces, from poetry to sketches, and photographs of YEF events were included. *Youth Forum* was a powerful medium of communication, and it helped circulate YEF statements or demands given at events where European leaders were present.

The 1979 meeting in Bergisch Gladbach, for example, brought together YEF and the European Commission to discuss political development in Europe. At the gathering, YEF made several demands to end racial segregation in South Africa, among them the following:

South Africa's Apartheid regime is based on a system of racial segregation and institutional discrimination against the majority population. The relationship maintained between the members of the E.C. (European Commission) and S.A. (South Africa) plays a vital role in sustaining the Apartheid regime. ... The YEF demands the following of the European Commission. 1) Discourage all trade missions to South Africa. 2) End all forms of military and nuclear collaboration in South Africa. 3) Institute a campaign to end all investments in South Africa in the goal of instituting policies of disengagement that maintain an apartheid state.

YEF lobbied against the apartheid regime and helped build momentum to support youth leadership, participation, and solidarity with liberation movements globally. The urgency of taking concrete action to end apartheid, prevent a rise in fascism, and work together for global peace within and beyond Europe was often expressed in the *Youth Forum*.

Archival documents also offer evidence of YEF's actions in helping set the foundation for the European Commission, a committee that represented the voices of European youth. YEF featured articles of direct concern to European youth, such as the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child. Noting the challenges of youth employment, access to quality education and literacy, as well as professional training opportunities, amid shifting demographics, migration, and environmental concerns, YEF advocated for the UN's Declaration of the Rights of the Child. Specifically, YEF underscored the responsibilities of nation-states to uphold youth rights, freedoms, and well-being in accordance with Article 10:

The child shall be protected from practices which may foster racial, religious, and other forms of discrimination. He shall be brought up in a spirit of understanding, tolerance, friendship, peace and universal brotherhood, and in full consciousness that his energy and talents should be devoted to the service of his fellow men.

YEF's advocacy on migrant integration, environmental sustainability, and nuclear disarmament reflected an urgency for concrete actions toward peace—demands being made by youth today.

Intergenerational solidarity and the fostering of transnational cooperation across European states were also defining features of YEF's organizing strategies. Building their movement across contexts, as well as among diverse age groups, was key to addressing economic and political tensions across the EU. Embracing a future of uncertainty yet striving to visualize possibilities, youth activists then and now have found that intergenerational and transnational solidarities pass the test of time in fostering youth sociopolitical action for rights, freedom, and global peace. Such an observation is not mine alone, as several YEF documents stated that “the absence of war does not mean peace.” Indeed, more is needed to ensure that all people can be and live well.

EMBRACING THE PRESENT—VISUALIZING FUTURE POSSIBILITIES

As I continued my archival research, with heartache I observed threats to freedom of speech and political divisions unfold in the United States, along with wars in Gaza and Ukraine. These circumstances often made me feel helpless. Yet, at the center of my research was a desire to better understand histories of youth sociopolitical development and their relevance to contemporary activism. Taking stock of the sociopolitical context, I was encouraged by the YEF movement's sociopolitical actions, discourses, and ways of supporting one another, as evidenced in the archives. Returning to my question—*What can we learn from YEF to help support youth activists today?*—I offer two concrete strategies.

“The absence of war does not mean peace. Indeed, more is needed to ensure that all people can be and live well.”

Critical compassion and relational solidarity can help sustain transnational cooperation, pluralism, and democratic citizen participation. Critical compassion is defined as practices or behaviors that are humanizing and caring. Within settings, such as the classroom, a critically compassionate learning community is one where safety and the bravery to challenge ideas can coexist. Complementarily, relational solidarity is characterized by relationships of mutuality and collective accountability among activists and allies, for example. Together, these skills are essential for global peace—and a foundation for collective action oriented toward liberation.

Critical compassion, when paired with relational solidarity, involves fostering a sense of community and relationality. In the classroom, for example, I have fostered critical compassion among students by having them interview their families about their migration histories. Students then present their family stories to the class, and in this way they come to acknowledge similar and differing challenges, along with shared dreams. Supporting students' development of critical compassion as a sociopolitical skill requires guiding them in learning to be reflexive and open-minded, as well as comfortable engaging in dialogue with others who have differing points of view. Fostering relational solidarity through community, connectivity, and sociopolitical action centered on care for one another has become my mission since returning to the United States.

The lessons I carry with me from the YEF archives—their optimism, their tenacity, and the power of youth coming together to share, connect, and learn from one another—have been an antidote to these precarious times. One notable moment I reflect upon was being invited to give the keynote at the *XV Convegno Nazionale della Società Italiana di Psicologia di Comunità* (SIPCO), organized by Italian community psychologists Dr. Alessia Rochira and Dr. Terri Mannarini at the Università del Salento. The conference explored themes of liberation, emancipation, well-being, and solidarity with marginalized peoples. Offering a keynote on the limits and possibilities of community psychology, especially in relation to shifting sociocultural, political, and economic contexts, allowed me to draw upon archival evidence from the YEF movement.

CONCLUSION

Coming full circle, the relationships I formed with scholars in my discipline, as well as colleagues at EUI, HAEU, and in the local communities of Florence, have helped me understand activism and community organizing from a relational and global perspective. In particular, they have helped me see how youth are leading liberatory movements for peace and justice alongside communities most impacted by inequities in Italy and beyond. At the scholarly and professional level, it has helped me form relationships, research projects, and writing collaborations with colleagues in Italy, in particular with scholars who are similarly situated within my main disciplines—community psychology and youth studies. Some of the activities that I engaged in during my fellowship have bloomed into collaborations, such as coauthoring a manuscript with

Dr. Francesca Esposito of the Università di Bologna, where I facilitated a workshop on community-engaged research. The scholarly, professional, and personal impact that Fulbright had on me was deeply meaningful. Equally meaningful was situating the past in relation to the present as a means to visualize future possibilities anchored in fostering cross-cultural awareness, appreciation for diverse worldviews, and sociohistorical understanding of global relations toward peace and liberation.

Reflecting on my anchoring question—*What can we learn from YEF to help support youth activists today?*—I draw a few important lessons. First, the Italian and United Statesian youth who are organizing community events, similar to how YEF did, are calling for solidarity, global peace, and liberation. Then and today, youth activists are leading movements that bridge political divides toward unified peace. Second, while some media sources may frame these moments as the worst of times, I am idealistic and radically hopeful—much like YEF—that the time is ripe for harvesting unity and peace. The historical archive of youth movements can offer a blueprint from which we can build. Lastly, we can act with critical compassion to lead a more sustainable future. Together we can till a soil optimal for systemic change, innovation, connection, and care, building communities on common ground by listening, learning, and reflecting. I am looking forward to continuing my research, growing seeds of collaboration, and linking—like a vine—intergenerational activists and transnational scholars on a path for global peace.

FURTHER READING

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Dr. Jesica Siham Fernández at the European University Institute (EUI) entrance overlooking Villa Salviati, where the Historical Archives of the European Union (HAEU) are housed.

BIOGRAPHY

Jesica Siham Fernández is an associate professor of Ethnic Studies at Santa Clara University. From April to August 2025 she held a Fulbright-Schuman Fellowship, pursuing research at the European University Institute (EUI) in Florence, Italy. Jesica is the author of the award-winning book [*Growing Up Latinx: Coming of Age in a Time of Contested Citizenship*](#) (New York University Press, 2021), and co-editor of the [*Handbook of Decolonial Community Psychology*](#) (Springer, 2024). She can be contacted at jsfernandez@scu.edu.
