Young people, politics and citizenship

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Introduction

This chapter addresses young people's engagement with the state, their communities, and with social and political issues, and how they enact their rights and duties as citizens. Over time, what is meant by politics and citizenship has come to include an increasingly wide range of practices, but these fundamentally still relate to how young people participate in the polity, the public sphere and civil society, including voting habits, civic knowledge, involvement in party politics, activism, consumption and production of political media, creation of community, and relationship to rights. This chapter looks at a range of predominantly Western approaches to youth, politics and citizenship by discussing the evolution of key concepts in the field, considering the special status held by youth as political actors, and by exploring the current challenges to theories and practice of youth participation and citizenship brought about by recent socioeconomic change.

Defining young people, politics and citizenship: the evolution of key concepts

Theoretical approaches to youth, politics and citizenship are determined by historical moment, discipline and location. From the 1950s to the 1970s, the political socialization of children and young people was an important theme in US political science and psychology as well as in other areas such as Latin American sociology, especially given the emergence of the youth-led social movements of the late 1960s. This research focused on the psychological development of political consciousness. Since this time, according to Holdsworth et al. (2007), three key concepts have emerged: first, the 1970s and 1980s saw the development of interest in youth participation in decision-making. This era marked the first wave of an international cross-disciplinary youth rights movement championing the inclusion of young people in political spaces and public conversations that affect them. This recognition of the participatory rights of young people was enshrined in the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.
The following period was characterized by debate on youth *citizenship*, including not only rights, but also civic and political knowledge and responsibilities. From the 1990s onwards there has been an explosion of interest and concern regarding young people’s participatory citizenship: their awareness of and engagement in politics and current affairs, from their commitment to voting to their attendance at protests. Research projects out of political science, sociology and education have frequently identified a ‘civics deficit’ and many nations have developed policies, programmes and school curricula to address this problem. There have also been supranational policy recommendations such as the European Commission’s 2001 White Paper on youth. Third, into the 2000s, the language of civic engagement has emerged, especially in sociological literature. Debates about youth and politics have been strongly influenced by Putnam’s (1999) work on social capital and civic engagement in the USA to address their commitment to civil society, including volunteering and other kinds of community involvement.

Taken together, these key themes of political socialization, participatory citizenship and civic engagement form the foundation of contemporary studies on youth, politics and citizenship. Next, this chapter examines the particular circumstances of youth that give them a special status in the field of politics and citizenship, and then explores how theories and practice of youth participation have been transformed in response to recent socio-economic change.

**Young people’s status as political actors**

Young people have a special status as political actors for a number of reasons. First, the category of ‘youth’ straddles the formal age divide between those who have full citizenship rights, in particular, political rights, and those who don’t. Commonly around the world, young people must be over 18 to vote or stand for office. At the same time, there is a huge variance within and across countries in the legal age for many other rights to be activated, for example, entitlement to an adult wage, access to unemployment or carer’s benefits, or occupation of public space after certain hours. Further, the period of youth has been constructed as a time of citizenship training, during which young people are taught about political participation rather than facilitated to engage in it. As White and Wyn (2007: 112) note, citizenship is linked to adult status, and policy that addresses youth citizenship tends to treat young people as passive recipients of civic education that will prepare them for their future adult role.

Second, political institutions are created by adults to serve an adult agenda and are not structured around young people’s interests or designed to engage them. Research has long indicated that young people feel marginalized by formal politics. There is a significant gap between what young people perceive as ‘politics’ and the issues they identify as important to them: politics is associated with formal political institutions, especially parliamentary processes. Young people do not tend to define their own concerns and the activities they engage in around these as politics. However, young people’s lack of interest in and engagement with formal politics and political institutions is not the same as a lack of interest in political issues or an inability to act politically. As Vromen (2003) among others has demonstrated, young people’s political interest and participatory practice can be better captured with more open typologies of politics.

Third, young people have always been the subject of fascination in politics because of the long-standing idea of a generation gap in political outlook and commitment. Youth
is commonly associated with activism and with liberal politics. Young people of an earlier generation were the drivers of the 1960s Western social movements and more recently, youth have been instrumental in dismantling both communist and post-communist regimes in Eastern European countries, for example, Ukraine’s Orange Revolution in 2004, and have been a strong presence in international protests against the war in Iraq and in the anti-corporate globalization movement. There is some evidence that young people are less conservative than older people, especially in relation to party preferences and social issues (Furlong and Cartmel 2007). However, youth has also been linked with apathy. Many studies have demonstrated that young people are less likely than older people to be interested in formal politics, to vote, to affiliate with a political party or to exhibit high levels of political knowledge (ibid.). For example, a 1999 survey of 90,000 youth in 28 countries found widespread scepticism about traditional forms of political engagement and shallow understandings of democracy (Torney-Purta et al. 2001).

Young people’s role in politics occupies a special place in the public imagination because they are positioned paradoxically as both highly active and apathetic. This framing of young people takes on particular forms in contemporary thinking about issues for youth politics and citizenship because of recent socio-economic change.

Current challenges to theories and practice of youth policies and citizenship

The contemporary conditions of economic rationalism, globalization and individualization mount a challenge to theories and practices of youth politics and citizenship. The current generation of youth no longer experiences a linear pathway to traditional adult status: compared to earlier generations, young people today stay in education and the family home longer and change jobs frequently rather than pursue a career for life (see White and Wyn 2007). This generation highlights the arbitrariness of age-based rights and the outdated perception of youth as passive citizens-to-be, for in many respects they are living simultaneously youthful and adult lives. Their experiences also raise questions about the paradoxical assumptions about young people as either apathetic or at the vanguard of social change, for while it can be argued that socio-economic changes have diminished traditional forms of citizenship and have marginalized young people from conventional political participation, new modes of youth engagement have emerged and older ones have re-emerged. Contemporary research on youth politics and citizenship complicates binary thinking about young people and politics.

Economic rationalism

One trend in contemporary research on youth and politics documents how new economic conditions make it harder for young people to enact their citizenship status. Many young people struggle to achieve their social rights, that is, enjoy the economic security on which citizenship is predicated, in the context of a dismantled welfare system and neoliberal economic policies that devolve responsibility for economic security from the state onto the individual. Unlike previous generations, young people today do not have straightforward access to social security and at the same time face reduced employment opportunities. The new economy has made citizenship elusive for young people because they cannot move easily into economic independence, on which autonomy depends, but
must now balance prolonged periods of training with insecure work in a highly competitive labour market (Jones and Wallace, 1992). Those working in the tradition of Marshall (1950), the influential theorist of citizenship as a tripartite system of rights, argue that young people cannot activate their participatory rights in isolation from these social rights. The privatization of formerly public services and spaces such as youth employment services or leisure facilities has also reduced young people’s access to both the state and the public sphere and thereby has limited their opportunities to participate.

Other research focuses on how new economic challenges, in particular, the collapse of the youth job market, force young people to prioritize economic security over political rights. A study of youth in 41 countries found that failure to register to vote is a consequence of what the researchers call ‘lifestyle’ rather than apathy: young people were interested in politics, but often failed to register to vote because they moved so frequently for work-related reasons (Lagos and Rose 1999). In these ways, economic rationalism constrains participation.

**Globalization**

Another focus for contemporary work on youth citizenship is the impact of globalization. Globalization is seen to loosen young people’s traditional citizenship ties, especially in relation to national identifications, as a result of increased migration, the internet, the ease and popularity of travel and the powerful reach of a global youth consumer culture. Globalization has also meant that political and economic decisions and social and cultural trends occur supra-nationally, which can undermine young people’s belief in the efficacy of the nation-state. The nation means different things to different youth in this context. In much Australian research, young people’s attachment to national community is shown to be fairly weak. For example, Ang et al. (2006: 33) found their cohort of young Australians wary of excessive patriotism and open to cultural differences.

However, cosmopolitanism is not universally or evenly embraced. For example, in their six–country study of young people’s citizenship and European identity, Jamieson et al. (2005) found that most were more strongly attached to their city, nation and region than they were to Europe. For some other young people again, ‘the foreigner’ has become a target for fears about social and economic change. There are some indicators that right-wing nationalism and even extremist ideologies gained currency among a minority of marginalized youth through the 1990s.

**Individualization**

Contemporary youth politics and citizenship studies also grapples with the ways that individualization has replaced collective identification. Personal and lifestyle issues have become more significant for young people than movement– or party-based politics. According to theorists of individualization, traditional forms of fixed community and associational life have been replaced by transitory and multiple affiliations which do not lend themselves to ‘thick’ citizenship (Bauman 2001). This trend is often linked to the widespread disenchantment among young people with formal party politics. However, as Jamieson et al. (2005) show, low trust in political systems does not generally indicate low interest in social and political issues. For example, a 2002 UK Electoral Commission report found that of all the cohorts researched, young people were the least likely to vote, but also the most likely to have had discussions about political issues with friends and family (Russell et al. 2002).
spite of their finding that young people are sceptical about traditional forms of political engagement, Torney-Purta et al. (2001) note their openness to other kinds of civic and political participation. Similarly, a large US study of civic engagement found 15–25 year-olds half as likely as the 55+ cohort to be involved in electoral activities, but had twice the level of involvement in community activities (Keeter et al. 2002).

Theorists such as Inglehart (1990) suggest that young people have become more focused on quality of life concerns as a result of a generational shift from ‘materialist’ to ‘post-materialist values’, which is evident in the rise in commitment to issues such as the environment, peace, HIV/AIDS and animal rights. Similarly, while collectivist, hierarchical social movement politics has ceased to be popular with young people, there is evidence of new, more individualized forms of activism. These include computer hacking, culture jamming, brand boycotts and recycling, as well as the creative activities of the decentralized anti-corporate globalization movement. Other youth researchers argue that individualization has led to new socialities and communities. Terms such as ‘neotribes’, ‘lifestyles’ and ‘scenes’ describe loose networks that young people create in their leisure activities such as clubbing or online social networking. It is argued that the diminution of public space for young people to use both socially and politically and the rise of consumer culture in its place have seen young people carve out new spaces such as clubs, raves, hip hop gigs and the internet as alternative public spheres, or as sites of new community (Harris 2004).

**Continuities and geopolitical differences**

Economic rationalism, globalization and individualization have had a significant impact on theories and practices of young people’s participation. However, it is important not to overestimate the shift to new modes of politics and citizenship. Youth-led voter registration drives were held throughout the 1990s, some especially focused on marginalized populations such as African-American youth. The USA and Canada have both seen recent strong increases in youth voter turnout, and in Australia (where voting is compulsory) there has been a significant rise in youth voter registration. Roker (2007) notes the strong commitment young people, especially young women, have to traditional forms of social action. Vromen (2003) demonstrates that even a small expansion in definitions of participatory politics significantly increases the number of youth activities that can be counted. This picture unsettles the assumption that there has been a wholesale generational move away from conventional politics.

The internet has been an important force in the resurgence of youth engagement in formal politics, as it is now a key site for young people to express their views about politics and create new public spaces for articulation and exchange of politically and socially engaged ideas and activities. Many young people are keen bloggers and youth are the primary users of social networking sites, which themselves house tens of thousands of political groups. Politicians recognize the value of online activity and many use social networking and video-sharing sites to engage youth (albeit to questionable effect).

It is also important to recognize geopolitical differences in the forces that delimit or enable engagement. For example, Kovacheva (2005: 25) notes that in areas such as South-western and Eastern Europe, it is the ongoing centralization of political and social life rather than individualization which inhibits young people’s participation. The political history of specific national contexts also cuts across assumptions about the value of youth
engagement, for example, young political activists in South Africa have suffered marginalization as a result of their engagement (see Everatt 2001). Young people’s take-up of politics and citizenship is dynamic and it is most useful to look at their participation across a shifting spectrum that is shaped by local circumstances, socio-economic factors and demographic variables as well as global forces.

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References


