

Young People and Politics: Apathetic and Disengaged? A Qualitative Inquiry

Submitted by

Nathan Manning
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Department of Sociology
Faculty of Social Sciences
Flinders University, South Australia.

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Abstract

This thesis is an examination of the prominent discourse which claims young people are apathetic and disengaged from politics. It is argued that this discourse is based upon two faulty conceptual assumptions, firstly, that youth is a period of linear transition to adulthood, and secondly, that the discourse unreflexively applies an unproblematised notion of politics which has its origin in the eighteenth century Scottish Enlightenment. The research used in-depth qualitative interviews to explore the ways in which young people operating across the political spectrum understand and practice politics. These qualitative findings add to existing studies of young people and politics, which are predominantly quantitative in approach. The findings suggest, that the Scottish Enlightenment's narrow, regulatory, liberal model of politics is the hegemonic model of politics for participants. However, this hegemony is challenged by participants' own 'political' practices, the collapse of liberalism's public/private divide under conditions of late modernity, and an interconnected sense of self. Moreover, contrary to the discourse of apathetic and disengaged youth, that there are a number of ways of understanding and practicing politics, particularly in light of social processes – such as individualisation, new social movements, and consumerism – driving recent social change.

Author's Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Signature:

Date:

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Introduction

Background

Upon returning from my first trip to Europe, indeed my first international trip, I had begun thinking a great deal about how people live. How do people get to a point where they are blasé about people surviving on the street through begging, where huge shantytowns exist just beyond the limits of fabulously wealthy international capitals? And in everyday situations where people are confronted with abject poverty and social injustice, what do they do? In the face of knowing that much of the vast wealth of Western countries is derived from the blood, sweat, and poverty of developing nations, how do we in the West go on?¹ In what ways are people trying to live just lives? Why is it that some people are concerned about these things, while others seem nonchalant? From these thoughts I began to think about young people and some of the changes that appeared to be taking place in the meaning and practice of politics, and how young people oriented themselves to the world around them, given they are often portrayed as narcissistic and more interested in new technology and products than politics. Were they dominated by consumerist aspirations, the pragmatism demanded by a competitive world or activist/revolutionary intentions? Where does politics fit in the lives of young adults? And when young people were trying to change the world around them, how did they go about it? With the decline of trade unions and political party membership, where is young people's political energy being directed?

At the same time I was very interested in some of the critiques of postmodernism. I had begun to think that while postmodernism and poststructuralism had shown us the

¹ At one point I was taken with the idea of meaning, what makes life worth living – I wanted to write a thesis about why people get out of bed in the morning. From my perspective, social justice, and politics in a broad sense, would have to feature in some people's accounts of why they got out of bed in the morning. While ultimately my research did not ask people why they get out of bed, I like to think that in some ways my thesis does ask *how* they get out of bed. Shifting the focus from one broadly about the meaning people give their lives to how they relate to the world around them, in particular the world of politics.

“groundlessness” (Lash, 1999) of social life – the ways in which social life was constructed – deconstruction alone was not enough (Lash, 1996). Postmodernism, poststructuralism, and deconstructionism may have created space for difference to *be*, but it had not provided foundations upon which we could build and live life *with* difference. An investigation of Lash’s “groundless ground”, the ways in which people were carving out a life, communities, reinventing tradition or creating new political collectives in the face of deconstruction’s lesson that there is no ultimate fixed truth or *ground*, became an increasingly appealing idea.

My preoccupation with ethics and politics meant the project began to look like an investigation of how young adults tried to ethically ‘be’ in this second and ‘groundless’ (Lash, 1999) neo-liberal modernity. Part of this would be a commitment to trying to investigate those who had little time for politics. Through my time in the hospitality industry, I had met and worked with many young people who had little regard for politics or even current events (of course I have also worked with numerous students, artists, and professional chefs and waiters who were highly ‘engaged’ with politics and current affairs). Despite their lack of civic/political ‘engagement’, I knew these people to be good people and did not think of them as apathetic; moreover I knew they thought of themselves as decent, regular people, certainly not particularly apathetic or cynical about politics or the world. So why was it that they showed little interest in politics and current events? What was their relationship with politics such that a lack of concern or ‘engagement’ did not undermine their sense of themselves as decent human beings? If they were not apathetic/immoral/amoral, nor oppressed or marginalised to such an extent that they felt powerless to have an affect, how did they rationalise their lack of social/political ‘engagement’? It was this concern, with those young people who are often described as ‘disengaged’, that ultimately shaped the project into one about how young adults understand and practice politics.

Youth and Politics – The Focus of This Thesis

My concern with the theme of how young adults understand and practice politics was largely shaped by the growing trend in recent years for young people to be characterised

as apathetic and disengaged from politics. Such a characterisation has been proposed by numerous sectors of society, including the media, government, and social researchers. This thesis thus interrogates the discourse that asserts young people are apathetic and disengaged from politics. In it I argue that while there is considerable evidence to suggest young people are apathetic and disengaged from politics, this position relies on two faulty conceptual assumptions. The first is a particular conception of young people, which understands youth as deficient and problem, as a period of linear transition to adulthood. Over the past several decades major social changes have fundamentally altered young people's transition to adulthood and in turn this has affected young people's integration with the polity. The second assumption, and the major focus of the present research, is the discourse's unreflexive and unproblematized application of a narrow liberal definition of politics. The use of this model of politics effectively squeezes out dimensions of the contemporary political repertoire by defining the parameters of politics: what legitimately counts as politics, where politics takes place, and who can legitimately take part in politics.

This study used long qualitative interviews to explore the way young people involved in across the political spectrum, including those not involved, understand and practice politics. Not surprisingly, the present research found the narrow liberal understanding of politics was widespread among participants, and of course some participants practice politics accordingly. However, there was also considerable evidence that such a notion of politics is undermined by participants' practices. While participants may hold to a narrow hegemonic notion of politics, their everyday lives can be seen as enmeshed with politics, highlighting tension, if not a schism, between their ostensive understanding of politics and lived experience. The research also found many participants viewed politics as polysemic and had a broad political repertoire which included politicising oneself and one's 'private' life.

I therefore contend in this thesis that the discourse of young people as apathetic and disengaged from politics firstly, rests on a notion of youth which no longer reflects the experiences of young people, belonging to a time when young people did follow more

linear paths to adulthood. Secondly, the narrow classical liberal notion of politics this discourse adopts renders it blind to alternative ways of doing politics. Such a notion of politics, while still hegemonic, is the product of a past social system and does not reflect the social circumstances and lived experiences of many young people.

The thesis is divided into two parts. Part One will examine the evidence for the argument that young people *are* apathetic and disengaged from politics, while Part Two will provide a challenge to this discourse by discussing the findings of the present research. Chapter One reviews recent research on young people and politics, which typically finds young people to hold little knowledge of or interest in politics. Chapter Two will contextualise the youth as apathetic and disengaged discourse as located within a much broader discourse which posits youth as deficient, problem, and on a linear transition to adulthood. Chapter Three explores the narrow conception of politics maintained by the youth as apathetic discourse. It will be argued that this notion of politics is bound up with classical liberalism and its central tenets, namely a public/private divide and an atomistic self. Chapter Four continues the task of opening up the political began in the previous chapter. This chapter discusses an argument complementary to the apathetic youth discourse, which arises from contemporary social theory. Following this argument, modernity has broken the strong communities and social bonds of the past, leaving individuals atomised and disconnected from one another. At the same time the public sphere has been colonised by the private and no longer provides a forum for politics where individual problems meet and form public issues. This vision of post/late modern life is challenged in the second half of this chapter with a discussion of alternative theoretical approaches and results from empirical studies of contemporary politics and activism.

Part Two begins with Chapter Five and a discussion of the development of this project and its methodological issues and approach. Chapter Six introduces those participants whose conception of politics is in accordance with the hegemonic notion of politics. Chapter Seven examines the tension or schism between how participants understand politics and what they do in their everyday lives. This chapter shows that for numerous

participants, their notion of what politics is excludes a raft of practices they undertake in their daily lives, which could be seen as political. Chapter Eight reveals the polysemic nature of politics discussed and practiced by numerous participants. These forms of ethico-political practice arise from the collapse of classical liberalism's public/private divide. It will also be shown that these young people eschew the atomised self of classical liberalism in favour of a more interconnected self, a conception of the self which highlights the way individuals are implicated, connected with and affect the world around them. A group of participants who are described as "critically disengaged" from politics are also discussed, along with the role of reflexivity in the political/ethical repertoire of some participants.

Finally, the thesis concludes by reviewing and evaluating the youth as apathetic and disengaged discourse, and discussing the implications the findings of the present study hold for future research of young people and politics. I argue that from the vantage point of researcher, we must be aware of the pronounced role our conceptions of complex phenomena like youth and politics play in shaping the knowledge we produce. This project has forced me to seriously consider the meaning of youth, adulthood, and politics. With a vigilant reflexivity, I believe, we can aspire to an awareness of the ways in which we are producing particular kinds of knowledge.