

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

Submitted by

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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

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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

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## 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?<sup>1</sup> 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

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

# Part One

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As outlined in the introduction, this thesis is an examination of the discourse which posits youth as apathetic and disengaged from politics. Using qualitative research it explores to what extent this discourse reflects young people's relationship with politics.

Part One of this thesis will examine the argument for youth being understood as apathetic and disengaged. Chapter One will review recent research, with a focus on Australian studies, which find young people to generally be disinterested, lacking adequate knowledge, and disengaged from politics. Having established ample evidence for the argument that young people are apathetic and disengaged, Chapters Two and Three interrogate two underlying assumptions this discourse relies upon. Chapter Two, "Conceptualising Youth", argues that the 'apathetic youth' discourse should be located within a much broader discourse which views youth as deficit and problem. Furthermore, it shows that such an approach holds youth to be a period of linear transition to adulthood; a transition which has become deeply problematic in recent decades. Chapter Three, "Conceptualising Politics", examines the second underlying assumption of the discourse of apathetic and disengaged youth, namely the unproblematic and unreflexive use of the hegemonic, liberal, regulatory model of politics. Chapter Four builds on the broader meaning of politics emerging in Chapter Three, and provides a thorough going critique of the relevance of liberalism's public/private divide in late modernity.

# Chapter 1

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## Young People and Politics: Apathetic and Disengaged

### Introduction

This chapter will review the evidence for the argument that young people are apathetic and disengaged. In Australia, where voting is compulsory, this area of research is in its infancy, while in countries with voluntary voting such as the United Kingdom<sup>1</sup>, low voter turnout among young people has led to a greater number of inquiries and general public anxiety about disengaged and apathetic young people. The discussion in this chapter will begin with some general comments and characterisations of young people's relationship to the political, followed by an examination of recent Australian research. This research indicates that young people: hold low levels of knowledge of politics; show low levels of interest and involvement in politics; feel politics is remote and removed from their lives; feel cynical about politics and are untrusting of politicians. Some of these studies point to socio-economic barriers to young people's political engagement, while others suggest an interest or involvement in politics is associated with adulthood and its institutions such as work, family/parenthood. In order to test the case that young people are apathetic, recent research on young people's relationship with politics must be canvassed to assess the dimensions of young people's alleged political apathy.

### Young People: Apathetic and Disengaged – General Context

In his 2005 Australia Day Address, the Governor-General Major General Michael Jeffery found occasion to voice his concerns over the “complacency” and lack of “understanding” Australians have for our democracy and Constitution (Jeffery, 2005, p. 2). According to Australia's Head of State, young people are the worst offenders:

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix A for a discussion of UK research on young people and politics.

*And there is a worrying trend of disengagement from our democratic process particularly amongst younger Australians. (Jeffery, 2005, p. 2)*

To his credit, the Governor-General suggests it is not that young people simply do not care, but that

*The issues that interest them are often overshadowed by the rough and tumble of politics, however justified that may be in a robust democracy. (Jeffery, 2005, p. 2)*

It is also worth noting that his notion of civics and citizenship education would include more than just learning about voting (p. 3).

While generally we do not know enough about our Constitution and seemingly take our democracy for granted, it is young people whose apparent “disengagement” is called into focus. In the Governor-General’s account, the problem of young people’s disengagement is one which requires adult society to “find ways to spark their interest and involvement” otherwise, “we risk the consequences of more young Australians simply turning away.” (2005, p. 2)

Of course, the Governor-General is not alone in making such claims about young people and their relationship with politics. The mass media regularly discuss young people as apathetic, as in Lindsay Jennings’ article for Northern Echo in England, titled ‘Why apathy rules among the young’ (2001). In Australia, David Salter’s depiction of younger people as self-evidently not interested in public issues is typical:

*The voters who **do** decide elections – predominantly in that 18-39 age group – lend their ears elsewhere. They’re mostly listening to the FM music stations, which rarely mention politics outside their news bulletins for fear of scaring away an audience that finds public issues boring and irrelevant. (2006, p. 46, emphasis in original)*

A recent article by Tegan Sluggett's (2006) titled, "Young voters just can't be bothered", also declares young people are ill-informed and utterly disengaged and apathetic toward politics.

Mark Coultan's (2004) article about a protest against the Australian Government's treatment of asylum seekers, which took place on the television show Big Brother, posits the protestor (Merlin Luck) as an anomaly for his "apolitical" (p. 29) generation. Coultan quotes "social analyst" David Chalke, who works for a market research firm which tracks cultural change, saying "They [young people] are not hostile to refugees. They're just not interested in the whole political thing, it's a bore." Chalke dubs the Big Brother generation, or "those people aged 15-30 who are uncommitted to mortgages, family and children, and are classic Big Brother watchers and participants adultescents, because although they are adults, they have the attitudes of classical adolescents." According to Chalke this age group's values are based on "self, fame, novelty, the experience of me, now, and their social values are incredibly poorly developed."

Contrary to Chalke's characterisation of young people as apathetic and totally preoccupied with themselves and frivolous things like fame and novelty, Coultan goes on to quote Neer Korn, director of another social and market research company, who argues that young people *may* be disengaged from politics, but this is because of their *experience* of politics and protest: "They see the futility of protest. You can stand in line, and protest about the environment, but nothing happens in reality ... what's the point of protesting? What good does it do, who's listening?" (p. 29) This analytical confusion, jumping from young people as apathetic to arguing that they are disengaged as a result of their engagement with politics or issues, is rife in both journalistic forays into the field and those generated by social researchers. In fact, this is exactly what Jennings' (2001) article, cited above, does. She begins by conflating low voter turnout among young people with apathy and a lack of interest in politics, and then proceeds to invoke a psychologist to argue that young people are disengaged because they are dissatisfied with the way politics is working. The sorts of reasons these journalists appeal to in their



attempts to account for young people's alleged apathy cannot sustain the charge that they are apathetic. If young people are disengaged from politics because they are in a "fog of disillusionment" (Jennings, 2001, p. 1) this is not consistent with apathy or simply not caring about politics; they are in a "fog of disillusionment" as a *result* of some form of engagement and critique of politics. We might not expect analytical clarity from the mass media, but as we shall see in Chapter Three, it is only very recently that such analytical distinctions have permeated through academic and social research on young people and politics.

Staying for the moment with general comments about the apathy and disengagement of today's youth or the 'slackers' of Generation X (Griffin, 1997), we can see similar claims coming from the United States. Prominent champion of social capital theory and author of *Bowling Alone* (2000), Robert Putnam's characterisation of Generation X's political and civic disengagement is typical of mainstream interpretations of young people's social and political engagement. In Putnam's words:

*Compared with older generations ... they are less interested in politics, less informed about current events (except for scandal, personality, and sports), less likely to attend a public meeting, less likely to contact public officials, less likely to attend church, less likely to work with others on some community project, and less likely to contribute financially to a church or charity or political cause. (2000, p. 261)*

Putnam's comments about Generation X are akin to those made by Chalke cited above:

*X'ers have an extremely personal and individualistic view of politics. They came of age in an era that celebrated personal goods and private initiative over shared public concerns. Unlike boomers, who were once engaged, X'ers have never made the connection to politics, so they emphasize the personal and private over the public and collective. (2000, p. 259)*

Importantly, Putnam maintains that while Generation X is furthering the post Second World War trend of declining civic and political participation (or social capital), this trend was in fact set in motion by the previous generation, the Baby Boomers.<sup>2</sup> According to Putnam, “the erosion of American social capital began before any X’er was born, so the X’ers cannot reasonably be blamed for these adverse trends. That said, the X Generation reflects in many respects a continuation of the general course begun just after World War II.” (2000, p. 259) In Putnam’s account, charges of apathy are spread around a little more evenly with the real rupture in social capital and political participation occurring between what he calls the “long civic generation”<sup>3</sup> and the Baby Boomers. In his characterisation of Baby Boomers and their relationship with politics, we can see the trajectory that he sees Generation X taking:

*They are less likely to be interested in politics, less likely to follow politics with any regularity, less likely to express a political opinion, and less likely to have accurate information relevant to politics. (Michael Delli, cited in Putnam, 2000, pp. 257 – 258)*

*They vote less, campaign less, attend political meetings less, contribute less, and in general avoid their civic duties more than other generations. (Putnam, 2000, p. 258)*

From Putnam’s perspective, Generation X are “very inwardly focused” with good reason (2000, p. 259), and rather than being the generation which embodies the threat to community and democracy, they are simply following a path whose vanguard were most likely their parents.

### **Young People: Apathetic and Disengaged – Australian Research**

Social researcher Hugh Mackay (1993) frames the problem of youth and politics in very similar terms to those outlined by the Governor-General above:

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<sup>2</sup> Those born after the Second World War, between 1946 and 1964.

<sup>3</sup> Following Putnam the long civic generation includes those “born roughly between 1910 and 1940, a broad group of people substantially more engaged in community affairs and more trusting than those younger than they.” (2000, p. 254)

*The level of cynicism about politics and political institutions is most starkly revealed in the attitudes of young Australians who are approaching the age when they will be entitled to vote. Typically, teenagers find little to interest or inspire them in the political process, and they often report that politics is the most boring subject ever discussed at home. They claim that they can't see the point in voting and that, once they are entitled to vote, they will find it hard to crank up much interest or concern. (p. 177)*

Mackay goes on to say that while the actual act of voting does do something to raise young people's interest in politics, he claims that the Australian Electoral Commission is periodically sufficiently disturbed by "the level of apathy" among young people that they undertake advertising campaigns "designed to 'sell' young Australians on the virtues of voting." Mackay feels that this is a great failing of our political systems, saying, "In a country where voting is compulsory ... [such campaigns are] a remarkable recognition of the failure of the political process to fire young imaginations." (p. 177) Mackay ends his chapter on the relationship Australians have with politics through the story of "Jason", a young man who is surrounded by cynicism about politics, feels "disgusted" by the way parliamentarians conduct themselves, has a social group who also hold cynical views and "some ... reckon they are not even going to bother registering" to vote; he longs for a better politics but has no ideas about how to effect such a change and remains largely uninterested and disconnected from politics (pp. 183 – 184).

More recently, the University of Sydney, the Australian Electoral Commission, and the Australian National University have begun a joint, national, million-dollar research project called the Youth Electoral Study (YES). Their research counters the stereotype of young people as apathetic, claiming that young people are interested in political issues but not political parties and politicians (Print, Saha, and Edwards, 2004, p. 23). However, the picture that emerges of young people's relationship with politics, while not characterised by apathy, is clearly defined by a deficit, a disengagement from politics.

The study uses a mixed methodological approach to collect both qualitative and quantitative data. The quantitative side of the study is based on two notional cross sectional surveys of year 12 students undertaken in 2004 and again in 2006, including just under two hundred schools.<sup>4</sup> The qualitative data comes mostly from focus groups (with additional data supplied by some individual interviews) with young people aged 16-25 years, in school and non-school sites drawn from sixteen electoral divisions around the country.

What they have found generally supports the kinds of comments we have seen from the Governor-General and Hugh Mackay. Most young people will register to vote, generally because they believe it is the right thing to do, however, few knew they could enrol at 17. There were some gender differences in terms of enrolment, with young women more likely to say they intend to enrol and also more likely to actually be enrolled. Young women were also more likely to want to vote and more women than young men would vote if it were not compulsory. Only half of those surveyed would vote if voting were not compulsory. Approximately half of those surveyed said they “lack the knowledge to understand the issues, the political parties, to make decisions about voting, and in general to vote.” (Print et al. 2004, p. 13) The authors take this finding, much like the Governor-General and Hugh Mackay, to indicate that there is further work to be done by formal education in preparing young people for “active” citizenship (p. 22). Voting is not seen by the young people surveyed as a key part of one’s transition to adulthood, in fact, while most think it is important, “the majority also think voting is boring, a hassle and a waste of a Saturday.” (p. 23) Print et al. argue this finding indicates that for the students in their sample, the link between a citizen’s right and duty to vote is weak. Finally, their study

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<sup>4</sup> The project’s second report, *Youth, Political Engagement and Voting* (2005), examines the connections between certain forms of political engagement and voting. Their results for political activity are consistent with those reviewed later in that chapter. They also found, barring violent and destructive forms of protest, young people’s “politically-related activities are positively related to the intention to vote as adults, even if voting were not compulsory.” (Print et al., 2005, p. 27) Hence their conclusion that particular classroom exercises can further political awareness and engagement among young people. Importantly, however, they did find that “students are quick to recognise when practices such as school elections are genuine or not.” (p. 25) And that such tokenistic forms of ‘engagement’ can undermine “efforts to effectively produce active and participatory adult citizens.” (p. 26) The tokenism of many youth participation programs will be explored in following chapters.

found young people do not trust politicians and regard them as “liars and promise-breakers” and disinterested in young people (p. 21).

Print et al. conclude by saying that while young people:

*are typically stereotyped as politically apathetic... That is not what we found. They were interested in political issues, what to them were **real** issues, though not political parties and politicians.* (p. 23, emphasis in original)

While results about young people’s political interests are still forthcoming from Print et al., hopefully they will add to earlier research on Australian young people’s political interests. In 1997, Beresford and Phillips reported on research conducted in Western Australia into the level of young people’s (18 – 24 years) political interest, when such interest occurs and the reasons behind their developing interest. They found 60 per cent of their sample had high levels of interest in politics; 29 per cent had low levels of interest; and 11 per cent were disinterested. The authors note that when compared with studies of the political interest of secondary students, their results indicate much higher levels of interest. Beresford and Phillips account for the discrepancy by arguing that political interest is something that develops with age and the accompanying rights and responsibilities of legal adult status. They found that more people in the 22 to 24 year-old age-group (52%) took an active interest in politics than the 18 to 21 year-old age-group (45%). They also note that respondents said their interest in politics developed “as part of a maturing into the responsibilities of adulthood” (p. 13), for example through work, trade unions, and undertaking further education.

Beresford and Phillips also found strong correlation between social class and levels of political interest with:

*Sixty-six percent of those who reported a “professional/academic” household head claimed that they took an interest in politics once a week or more, compared with the average 49%. (1997, p. 13)*

Young people from a professional/academic family background were also more confident in their understanding of politics. Further education was also positively correlated with interest in politics with sixty-two percent of those reporting an interest in politics once or more a week being full-time students (p. 13).

They also found that interest in politics did not necessarily translate into active political participation. The scope of the research limits its explanatory power with regard to this schism, but they did find that the majority of young people (73%) – reflecting the trend of the community at large – “do not have a long-term commitment to the ideals of any political party” (p. 14). Young people said they did not want to join political parties for fear that it would “box them in”, preferring to be able to “exercise choice and the freedom to swap allegiance” (p. 14).<sup>5</sup>

In explaining the political interest of those with low levels of interest, the authors again find social class correlates. Those with low levels of interest in politics were more likely to be unemployed (50%) and “of the 20 who said they did not understand politics very well, 52% had a family background in the unskilled workforce, as opposed to 13% in the professional/academic category.” (p. 14) In accounting for low levels of interest, Beresford and Phillips cite young people’s claims that they feel: powerless to affect change; they lack the requisite skills and knowledge to understand its [politics] relevance; and they lacked faith in the system to bring about real change (p. 15).

While this research clearly highlights the correlation between social class and interest in politics, it also found that young people, from across the occupational spectrum, “showed very strong interest in, and support for, a range of current political issues:

- 87% supported republicanism;
- 83% supported a racially non-discriminatory immigration policy;
- 79% supported reconciliation with Aborigines;

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<sup>5</sup> These findings have been supported by recent research from the United Kingdom (Power Inquiry, 2006, pp. 83 – 87).

- 66% supported a more egalitarian society.” (p. 16)

In light of these findings, Beresford and Phillips suggest that young people’s lack of “active involvement” in political processes may in fact reflect mainstream politics’ inability to acknowledge, let alone tangibly address, the issues of *real* concern for many, if not most, young people (p. 16).

More recently, Chilla Bulbeck (Harris and Bulbeck, forthcoming) has undertaken a study of young people and their attitudes towards feminism and the women’s movement and their political engagements. Her study blended quantitative and qualitative data, using questionnaires, some interviews and a focus group.

Leaving the results about feminism and the women’s movement to one side, Bulbeck found university students in her sample to be more politically active than the secondary students or youth service clients which made up her sample (along with responses from students’ parents). Signing a petition was the most common form of participation, undertaken by 64 per cent of young women and 51 per cent of young men. Writing a letter to a politician or a newspaper was the second most popular form of participation, but undertaken at about half the rate of signing a petition, with women more likely than men to write to either a politician or an editor. Involvement in political parties was low across the sample with a sharp spike occurring only with the male university students at 22 per cent. Membership of activist groups, however, enjoyed greater numbers across the sample,<sup>6</sup> peaking with that of female university students at 40 per cent, while the average was around 10 per cent. Involvement with the women’s movement was generally low across the sample, averaging around five per cent. While designing one’s own website and ‘e-zine’ are activities undertaken by young people, Bulbeck concludes that “none were what would traditionally be defined as ‘political.’” (p. 11)

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<sup>6</sup> With the exception of male parents, and the “small” (p. 10) male university student sample who appear to have equal proportions in political parties and activist groups.

Bulbeck also found some evidence of social class having an impact on political engagement. As noted above, university students were the most active group, while of those from the youth service client group, one third had not engaged in any political activity, and the other two thirds generally engaged in the various activities at lower rates than the school students.<sup>7</sup>

During the focus group and interviews, Bulbeck was able to access some of the ways young people understand politics. She found that there was no consensus on exactly what counts as politics, with some discussion of the scale of political activity and how it affects its political meaning; for a petition to be effective/political it had to involve many people. On the other hand, some young people felt that every effort makes a difference. There were also differing views about the efficacy of ‘cultural politics’, with some feeling it a useful forum for political expression, while others questioned the ability of a medium like pop music to bring about social change.

At a broader level Bulbeck says that “most of the students” in her study “rejected politics as ‘boring’ or as something that did not interest them” (p. 14) She says that while young people have opinions about politics “there is widespread resistance to being self-defined as political or feminist.” (p. 16) Bulbeck also notes that the young people in her sample generally are not using “the new media of politics, the internet or cultural milieux, to pursue their activism.” (p. 16)

Given the findings of Beresford and Phillips (1997) outlined above, which indicated political interest is something young people develop over time, perhaps some of the lack of interest in politics Bulbeck has identified can be explained by her sample being so heavily weighted by secondary students. Of a total sample of 500, 320 were high school students, about 110 parents, and 40 university students. This means that about 64% of the total sample (or approximately 82% of the young people in the sample) were Year 11 and Year 12 students, typically aged between 16 and 17 years, and hence unable to vote.

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<sup>7</sup> It is important to note, as Bulbeck herself points out, this group is only a sample of 19 young people.



While Bulbeck notes that at least one of her respondents (a young female secondary student) feels disconnected and marginalised by mainstream politics with comments like, “[politicians are] A bunch of men with pot-bellies – and men who shave their eyebrows [and] speak of things we don’t understand really” (p. 15). Young people’s disconnection from the world of mainstream politics, and how this might relate to their perception of politics as boring or irrelevant to their lives, is given short shrift.

Earlier work on the political knowledge and attitudes of Australian young people by Lean (1996) paints a similar picture to that of the research outlined above. Lean’s survey of young people in full-time employment, secondary school, and university found that generally the political knowledge of young people is “poor” (p. 58). Much like Mackay (1993) and Print et al. (2004), Lean found many young people had negative attitudes and perceptions of Australian politics and politicians. Moreover, “young Australians lack knowledge in basic political concepts” (p. 59). Lean’s results show many young people feel distant and marginalised from politics, with respondents commenting on: politicians use of technical language and jargon; their exclusion from the decision making process; and 78 per cent said “politicians did not give enough attention to youth issues.” (p. 54; also see p. 55)

While Lean does seem to find at least some reasons for young people’s lack of interest in politics, she makes no sustained attempt to refute the notion that young people are apathetic towards politics. In fact, she finds cause to add to this notion of youth by saying “Youth are mainly preoccupied with self-centred issues.” (p. 53)<sup>8</sup>

These findings about young people’s political interests also correlate with those of Beresford and Phillips (1997), adding weight to their idea that the cleavage between the political interests of young people and the preoccupations of mainstream politics may act

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<sup>8</sup> Strangely, later in the same paragraph Lean seems to contradict these comments by saying that while young people were less interested in “Issues of inflation, interest rates and taxation ... They [the young people surveyed] were more likely to suggest areas of social justice, education, environment, world peace, public transport and homelessness as areas of political interest.” (p. 53) As Lean notes, such issues do lie beyond the bounds of much of mainstream politics, but by any measure they are hardly “self-centred issues”.

as a disincentive for participation. Also in line with Beresford and Phillips was Lean's finding that half of those surveyed thought they would become more involved with politics once they were earning a wage.

The remedies Lean suggests are also similar to those cited above – education to correct the civics deficit affecting young people, and nurturing young people's interest in political issues. However, she has no suggestions about how a more inclusive notion of politics might be brought into the lives of young people (or indeed, mainstream politics) and made meaningful.

Vromen's (1995) investigation of the political knowledge of Year 12 students, also found knowledge of politics was not widespread among young people. While most respondents could name the Prime Minister (98% correct) and the Leader of the Opposition (91% correct), most had trouble naming leaders of minor parties like The Democrats (12% correct) or The National Party (34% correct) (p. 79). Students also had difficulty with the responsibilities of different levels of government with only 38 per cent knowing that postal services were provided by the federal government (p. 78).

Vromen's analysis showed that young men held a statistically significant higher level of political knowledge than the young women (p. 84). She found that political interest was the significant variable affecting the political knowledge of young men and women, with young men recording higher levels of interest. Vromen argues that to overcome this divide the notion that women who are interested in politics are 'unfeminine' must be addressed. Having a non-English speaking background (NESB) also affected respondents' political knowledge, with students from English speaking backgrounds having more knowledge of Australian politics. Vromen suggests that lacking a family background socialised in Australian politics is what separates the two groups. Interestingly, parental occupation was not found to correlate with significant differences in political knowledge, even though "Children of 'professionals' had the highest mean, as expected, ... it was not significantly different from the other three means." (1995, p. 88)

The work of Ian McAllister (1998) on civic education and political knowledge also found largely similar results to those noted above. He found women, particularly those outside the labour force, have significantly less political knowledge than men (pp. 13 – 14). Respondents' birthplace also played a role in levels of political knowledge, with those from NESB countries with democratic traditions having less knowledge, but those from countries with few or no democratic traditions having the least knowledge; with the difference being statistically significant compared to Australian born (p. 14). Younger respondents were also more likely to provide incorrect answers than their older citizens. Again we see political knowledge accumulating over time, "by half a question for each additional decade that a person has been a member of the active electorate." (p. 15) Secondary education was found to be more influential on political knowledge than tertiary education (p. 16 – 17). Significantly, McAllister found that increased political knowledge was more effective in creating positive views about our democratic institutions than shaping political participation<sup>9</sup>:

*What it [political knowledge] does not do, at least in any significant way, is to modify the behavioural intention of the person; the likelihood that they will participate in the political process increases only slightly as a result of their greater knowledge. (1998, p. 20)*

McAllister's findings indicating a weak link between political knowledge and participation, supports Vromen's (2003) questioning of the assumption held by many researchers and policy makers that "if individuals are provided with more information then they are guaranteed to become more enthusiastic about politics and will want to participate and become 'good', 'active', citizens."<sup>10</sup> (p. 81)

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<sup>9</sup> To some extent these findings are supported by Lean (1996) when she found that those students who had studied politics, especially those who had been involved with a parliamentary based program, tended to have "more positive perceptions of politics and politicians." (p. 55)

<sup>10</sup> Indeed, Beresford and Phillips (1997) study also found high levels of interest and knowledge of politics did not significantly translate into more active levels of involvement. The nexus between knowledge and action will be explored in further chapters.

Susan Mellor has undertaken research of Australian students and politics, citizenship, and democracy (Mellor, 1998; Mellor, Kennedy and Greenwood, 2002). Generally her findings support those already discussed. Her 1998 research identified low levels of interest and participation in the political process among her sample of Victorian year 11 students, and low levels of trust for politicians and their motivations. Government and politicians were again felt by young people to be remote from their lives with, for example, only 23 per cent agreeing with the statement “I think that people in government care about what people like me and my family think.” (p. 52) Importantly, Mellor does not isolate young people as the wellspring of such views of government and politicians, instead arguing that these views are indeed reflected in broader Australian society.

Her more recent work (Mellor et al., 2002) is part of an international survey of 14-year-olds, involving twenty-eight countries. *Citizenship and Democracy* provides an insight into the civic knowledge, attitudes and levels of engagement of Australian youth. Again, they found low levels of trust afforded to political parties, with 70 per cent not trusting them (p. 95). While participants acknowledged an important role for government, they experienced limited space to debate social and political issues within the classroom and clearly do not trust politicians. Australian young people do not seem partial to participation, scoring “significantly below the International mean on three of the four scales which make up the Civic Engagement dimension.” (p. xix) The Australian sample also showed little support for the Conventional Citizenship scale, in that they:

*... believe a good citizen votes and shows respect for government representatives. But they regard knowing the country's history and following political issues in the press, and, especially, engaging in political discussion as relatively unimportant.*  
(p. xix)

Mellor et al. conclude that measures must be taken to help young people realise their agency, and like other authors (Lean, 1996; Mackay, 1993) call for politics to be made meaningful for young people. However, as White and Wyn point out, at present;

*The report simply advocates for 'citizenship education' as a study area in the curriculum, which will prepare young people for a future in which they vote in elections and fulfil their civic responsibilities, but do not discuss active engagement as citizens in the present. (2004, p. 89)*

White and Wyn cite Hannam's comments about civics education to argue that it can in fact be counterproductive:

*Learning about democracy and citizenship when I was at school was a bit like reading holiday brochures in prison. Unless you were about to be let out or escape, it was quite frustrating and seemed pointless (Hannam, 2000, cited in White and Wyn, 2004, p. 89).*

And as we have seen from McAllister (1998; Beresford and Phillips, 1997), greater civic knowledge and education alone is unlikely to lead to greater participation on behalf of young people.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has canvassed Australian research of young people's relationship with politics spanning over a decade. From the Governor General to the media to social research, young people are repeatedly found wanting when it comes to political knowledge, interest, and participation. From Putnam we had an international and generational perspective which finds young people travelling further along the path of apathy and civic and political disengagement began by the Baby Boomer generation. In Australia, research has consistently found young people to lack sound political knowledge, interest and involvement. These studies maintain young people feel cynical and untrusting of politics and politicians. Young people themselves time and again say they feel remote and disconnected from politics, occasionally commenting on how little scope there is for young people to be included in decision making processes or to have their concerns and interest heard by politicians. In these inquiries, young people regularly describe politics as boring and as holding little of interest for them. Researchers like Print

et al. and Beresford and Phillips have argued that while young people may have low levels of political participation, they are not apathetic in so far as they are interested in a range of political issues, if not politicians and political parties. Other research has identified barriers to young people's political engagement, citing socio-economic factors, gender, coming from a NESB, or not being socialised in Australian politics or democratic traditions more generally. Finally, we have also seen a weak link between political knowledge and political participation, undermining the calls by many researchers for greater political education for young people, which, as the argument goes, would naturally lead to further political participation.

Clearly, there is considerable evidence to support the notion that young people are apathetic and disengaged from politics. In the following two chapters, however, it will be shown that this portrayal of young people's relationship with politics is problematic because it: firstly, rests on an assumption that 'youth' is part of a linear transition to adulthood and thus understood as deficient; and secondly, defines politics in narrow and specific ways based on modernist models of classical liberalism.

# Chapter 2

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## Conceptualising Youth: Framing the ‘youth as apathetic and disengaged’ discourse

### Introduction

This thesis is a qualitative examination of the discourse which posits young people as apathetic and disengaged from politics. Having traversed in the previous chapter the research which finds young people apathetic and disengaged, this chapter will argue that the ‘youth as apathetic and disengaged’ discourse – the discourse in which these studies are couched – should in fact be located within a much broader discourse which defines young people as deficient and problem. Furthermore, the youth as apathetic and disengaged discourse conceptualises youth as a period of linear transition to adulthood. It will be shown that such a transition has become deeply problematised in recent decades and may no longer exist. If young people are spending longer in a period of youth, the implications of this are that traditional methods of including them in the political process may no longer be suitable, or indeed failing.

Before we can locate the youth as apathetic discourse within the broader discourse of youth as problem and deficit, it is necessary to develop an understanding of what we are meaning by the term ‘youth’. To do this, we shall begin with a potted history of the concept which highlights the ways in which ‘youth’ is socially constructed and varies according to differing cultural, economic, and historical factors. Having illustrated how the concept of youth is socially constructed, repeatedly defined as problem, and necessarily defined as deficient in relation to adulthood, the second part of the chapter will show that contemporary social change, which forces a youth ‘lifestyle’ and identity to be placed on people longer in their life, means that traditional ways of including young people in the political process may be failing. More recent attempts at including young

people in the political process will be reviewed and found often to be tokenistic and perhaps even a new means of governing young people.

### **A Potted History of Modern Youth**

The following section will provide a brief overview of some of the changes affecting youth and its modern manifestations. It will be argued that youth is socially constructed, driven by culture and shaped under specific social, economic, and historical conditions. This social constructivist position will be enhanced by the notion of youth as a *relational* concept, allowing the problematisation of the notion of youth itself.

With the onset of modernity, here used loosely to refer to the sweeping social and cultural changes set in train in particular by the industrial revolution, the place of youth in society, indeed the way youth was conceptualised, changed radically.

Frank Musgrove (1964, p. 33) begins his chapter on the history of modern notions of youth with the counter intuitive assertion that “The adolescent was invented at the same time as the steam-engine. The principal architect of the latter was Watt in 1765, of the former, Rousseau in 1762.” Musgrove’s at the time, “radical statement” (Bessant, Sercombe and Watts, 1998, p. 4) positions youth as a social category shaped by the actions and attitudes of adult society. He argues, contrary to there being something intrinsic to the age status of youth which dictates their position within society, that it is society itself which makes particular meanings and problems of youth. In Musgrove’s words, “Social legislation and changing social conventions *made* the adolescent.” (1964, p. 34, emphasis in original)



Musgrove plots how in the wake of the Industrial Revolution and Rousseau's<sup>11</sup> invention of the adolescent, English society for two centuries grappled with the proper place of youth in society. Rousseau and his followers invoked 'nature' to argue for a discrete period which was neither childhood nor adulthood. Adolescents were to develop according to the laws of nature, in relative isolation from the rest of human society, alone with his (because invariably it was a *he*) tutor in the wilderness. Rousseau is one of the forefathers of the notion of childhood as a time of innocence, an innocence which should be sustained by adult society. In Rousseau's words:

*Exercise his body, his limbs, his senses, his strength, but keep his mind idle as long as you can ... leave childhood to ripen in your children. In a word, beware of giving anything they need today if it can be deferred without danger to tomorrow.*  
(from *Emile*, cited in Musgrove, 1964, p. 52)<sup>12</sup>

In direct contrast to Rousseau, English philosopher John Locke advocated the rapid inclusion of young people into adult society. Locke, and contemporaries like David Williams, chastised the upper classes for the separation they maintained between children and their parents. Indeed, Williams complained of fathers who were more familiar with their dogs than their own children (Musgrove, 1964, p. 37).

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<sup>11</sup> As Bessant, et al. (1998) note, Rousseau was not the only Romantic to be carving out notions of the adolescent. During the eighteenth century in Germany there developed a genre of novels called *Bildungsroman*, "about youthful search, struggle and resolution." (1998, p. 5) Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1989; 1774) is a classic of the genre and established him in the *Sturm and Drang* (storm and stress) movement which continues to inform our ideas about adolescence and links up with the way social and psychological theory, and the practice of youth work have related to young people (Jeffs and Smith, 1998). As will also be seen in the historical work of Musgrove, it is important to note the exclusion of young women from such notions of youth.

<sup>12</sup> Rousseau's ideas of childhood as a time of innocence and adolescence as a discrete stage between the world of children and that of adults still have currency in the contemporary West. The idea that children should be protected from certain kinds of adult knowledge can be seen in the way we deal with the subject of death around children. A more everyday and common sense example might be the way we rate film and television, designating certain content – like sex or mental illness – as "adult themes". The idea that adolescence is a discrete period between adulthood and childhood can be seen in the way we continue to maintain a separation between primary and secondary education or in terms of the rights and responsibilities of adolescents.

Musgrove argues that beginning in the latter eighteenth century and extending to the early nineteenth century a movement began to incorporate young people of the middle and upper classes into their own families. The prime driver of this social experiment was home-based parent tutoring. Young people moved from the periphery of family life to its very centre. One of the reasons for this shift was to remove young people from the corrupting influence of menials and “social inferiors” (Musgrove, 1964, p. 39). This social experiment of youth and family integration gave young people an unprecedented status and importance at the centre of family life (Musgrove, 1964, p. 46).

Younger sons who were denied inheritance of course needed an education and were often not afforded home tutoring, meaning their education was to be in public schools. In keeping with the prevailing ideas of the time, this was a most undesirable situation: “as Edgeworth advised: ‘to a public school, as to a general infirmary for mental disease, all desperate subjects are sent, as a last resource.’” (Musgrove, 1964, p. 48) It seems these comments were not solely based on matters of social status. Public school boys were seen as volatile and possibly revolutionary. In fact, “Winchester, Rugby and Eton were the scene of repeated and ugly disturbances in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, which were settled only by the intervention of the army.” (Musgrove, 1964, p. 48)

After the 1830s, public school reform took hold and the inferior status, along with the violent unrest once attached to public schools, was outstripped by their exclusiveness and growing desirability. At the same time, children’s education was sequestered off into preparatory schools; no longer were public schools to house boys ranging in age from 8 – 19 years (Musgrove, 1964, p. 49, 55).

As for young women during this period, Musgrove notes that upper-class girls in the eighteenth century were largely educated at home within the family. During the late eighteenth century, private education for girls in turn brought them higher status, while by the end of the nineteenth century such an education led to frustrations and ultimately the Suffragettes movement (Musgrove, 1964, p. 50).

Prior to the changes in thinking about young people and their education that Musgrove has detailed, we find that in the pre-industrial period young people's lives were principally structured and disciplined through the practice of 'apprenticeship' or 'service'. Provisions for 'apprenticeship' were made through law, whereby young people lived in the household of their employer until such time as they could live independently, either through marriage or inheritance. For men this usually occurred by their late twenties and during the late teens for women (see Bessant et al., 1998, p. 6). Clearly, the social institution of apprenticeships had to change if modern notions of youth were to develop. Bessant et al. (1998, p. 7) argue – similar to Musgrove – that one of the pressures forcing the demise of the apprenticeship system was the threat of contamination by “social inferiors”. They go on to argue that in response to the failure of an educational system dominated by scholasticism to secure vocational outcomes for their children, and moral panics about bohemianism and political rebellion, the middle classes began to exercise increasing control over the young through schools. As we have seen with Musgrove's research, boarding schools of the nineteenth century were successfully reformed and their attendant social status increased. Their success ensured that they became the model for schools more generally.

While middle and upper class youth moved relatively quickly from an apprenticeship model to one dominated by the public school, with a brief experiment in home parent tutoring as described by Musgrove, things were different for working-class young people. For working-class youth, the demise of the apprenticeship system and the gathering pace of industrialisation brought notions of a 'free' labour force and an independence to many young people – Musgrove cites the 1842 Factory Commissioners reporting that many 14 year olds live independently (1964, p. 68). At the same time there was increasing pressure to limit the labour of children in factories and mines, and calls for employers to offer basic education to young employees (Bessant, Sercombe and Watts, 1998, p. 9). Once again, we see the influence of Rousseau's ideas about the 'innocence' of childhood, childhood as a special time when children need to be left in the world of nature and play, protected from the harsh realities of adult society.

At this time, youth seem largely stratified by class. During the nineteenth century, those in the middle and upper classes were increasingly educated in schools, away from their family, with children separated from adolescents through preparatory schools, beginning modern notions of an extended and discrete period of adolescence or youth. While there were attempts at curbing the amount of work working-class youth could do, and calls for them to partake in some kind of elementary schooling, many families could not afford to go without the wages of their children. Beyond the needs of individual families, it is argued that industrialising countries, including Australia, could ill-afford a modern extended adolescence (Bessant, 1993; Musgrove, 1964, p. 66). Again, this underlines the importance of factors beyond age or biology which shape youth, how we understand young people and the place and role they have in society.

While not wanting to delve into matters of juvenile delinquency in any great detail, it is important to note the role its invention played in establishing modern notions of adolescence. As we have seen, during the nineteenth century with the rise of industrialisation the labour of working-class children was needed to keep the wheels of industry turning. And while we have also noted that this meant numerous teenagers obtained a level of independence (both economic and familial) previously unknown, it was not long before the combined impact of the Factory Acts and an increasing demand for skilled labour squeezed many young people out of the work force. Of course, these young people were not in school, and if they were not in school and had been squeezed out of work, their new-found state of idleness roused anxiety and moral panic, particularly among the middle class. Musgrove cites a study of young people in Manchester from 1862 which found very high numbers of young people in neither school or work – half of those aged between 3 and 12 years of age and 17 per cent of those over 12 years of age (1964, p. 76). The presence of idle youths on the streets also clashed with the middle class' new mercantile use for the streets (see Finch, 1993).

Finch (1993) argues that a range of Police Acts introduced in the mid-nineteenth century were about clearing the streets for the middle classes. Various Acts were introduced which effectively made a range of behaviours criminally deviant – England's amended

*Metropolitan Police Act* of 1839, even gave police the power to apprehend those flying a kite (see Bessant et al., 1998, p. 11). Not surprisingly, this led to huge increases in the numbers of young people incarcerated and increasing fears about the criminality of young people. Bessant et al. (1998, p. 11) note that it was the sheer increase in numbers rather than a shift in thinking about youth, which led to separate prisons for youths. With juvenile offenders separated from adult offenders, science could now turn its gaze to the 'juvenile delinquent'. The affects of imprisonment on young people began to prompt calls for treating young people differently from adults. Munice (1983, cited in Bessant et al., 1998, p. 12) argues that notions of children's innate innocence, "for the first time [were] to be extended to the children of the perishing and dangerous classes". Again we see the influence of Rousseau's ideas about childhood and that if children 'go off the rails' it is for want of moral and religious instruction rather than the Medieval notion of children's innate propensities for evil (Munice, 1983, p. 34). A commander of a reformatory ship drew upon similar ideas when he said:

*The first great change that has to be affected ... is to make them "boys". They are too old, too knowing, too sharp, too much up in the ways of the world.* (Munice, 1983, p.37)

Much like the role of the public school in the creation of modern adolescence, which began with one class of youth (namely the middle class) and gradually came to encompass all youth with the onset of universal education from the latter nineteenth century, ideas about juvenile delinquency began with one class, namely the working class, and by the end of the nineteenth century had extended to suggest that most youth were potentially delinquent. As Bessant et al. (1998, p. 13) note, "the notion of all young people as inherently potentially delinquent, as inherently untrustworthy and prone to trouble, marks another significant milestone in the history of the emergence of the youth category."

Returning to the role of the school in constructing modern notions of youth, we can see that as the twentieth century progressed, school leaving ages were increased, gradually

including groups of young people like the working-class and young women, who had been marginalised from secondary schooling. While compulsory school leaving age in Australia has remained at 15 (with minor variation across states) since the 1980s, changes in youth policy and the labour market have increased effective leaving age to 18 years. Such changes include the way welfare payments are structured (for example as inducements to stay in school) and growing credentialism (see Bessant et al., 1998, pp. 14 – 15).

### *The social construction of youth*

What this thumbnail sketch of the emergence of modern notions of youth has illustrated is that youth is a product of how society organises itself; adolescence is not a biological imperative which structures social life, but something invented by society under particular social, cultural, and economic conditions. We have seen the influence of philosophy upon notions of youth in terms of the ‘innocence’ of childhood (Rousseau), or on the flip side, the way the views of philosophers like Locke influenced the integration of young people with the family and their rapid introduction to the adult world. Perceived problems with the apprenticeship model led to experiments with home-based parent tutoring, the reform of public schools, and finally their use as model for secondary schooling. Preparatory schools separated children from adolescents and secondary school separated adolescents from adults. And if young people were in school for extended periods of time, this in turn made them financially dependant upon adults. Notions of juvenile delinquency reinforced the idea of young people needing protection from the harsh realities of the adult world and in turn justified increased surveillance and control of young people who were increasingly seen as inherently potentially delinquent. The modern form of youth as an extended period of dependence, structured by compulsory schooling, minimal involvement with the labour market, and as a time when individuals are vulnerable to trouble and delinquency, arises from changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution and the philosophy of youth. Such a generalised, extended, dependent notion of youth can only prosper in wealthy societies that do not need child labour (such as industrialised societies) and where the ideas about what youth *is* work to

position young people as being in need of time and proper guidance and control to *become* adults.

Bessant et al. (1998, p. 4) argue that to talk about the invention of adolescence does not mean that other societies and cultures did not have similar categories of 'youth', or that 'the problem of youth' did not exist before Rousseau saw fit to invent the adolescent. As they note, various researchers have looked at the problem of youth during medieval times, or the existence of adolescence dating back to antiquity (1998, see p. 4). Springhall finds similar concerns about youth voiced in one of Shakespeare's works: "would that there were no age between sixteen and three and twenty, or that youth would sleep out the rest, for there is nothing in between but getting wenches with child, wronging the ancients, stealing, fighting." (1984, p. 21, from *The Winter's Tale*)<sup>13</sup>

The way any given population of youth is positioned within society has little to do with biology; otherwise societies would all be the same. The place of youth within society is not a biological imperative. As illustrated by Musgrove, youth is moulded and pushed and pulled in certain directions by the actions and prevailing ideas of society. Youth and the problem of youth is a matter of meaning or culture, not biology. We once saw fit for young people and children to work long hours in factories and to be exposed to birth and death at a young age. We now attempt to shield young people from a whole range of ideas and practices deemed 'adult' and thus, not fit for young people. Indeed, as Musgrove implies, different standards and ideas apply to different groups within youth. As we saw above, concerns were raised about the contaminating affect menials and other "social inferiors" could have upon upper class young people. Clearly, at least at the time, no such concerns existed for poor and working-class youths, for whom, "social inferiors" were of course their parents. Another clear example of differential treatment for groups within the category youth is that of gender. As noted above, even in 1964 Musgrove

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<sup>13</sup> In a quote attributed to Plato, some 2400 years ago, he raises similar concerns about the young, "What is happening to our young people? They disrespect their elders; they disobey their parents. They ignore the law. They riot in the streets inflamed with wild notions. Their morals are decaying. What is to become of them?"

could identify difference in the educational expectations of boys and girls from the same classes.

This discussion of the history of youth has highlighted the ways in which youth is a social construct, shaped by its given societal, cultural, and historical context. We have also seen that youth have repeatedly been defined as problem, from the reference in Shakespeare's work, through to the revolutionary youth of the early public schools, to the idle youth of the Industrial Revolution, and later the emergence of the juvenile delinquent. It is the contention of this thesis that the discourse of apathetic and disengaged young people is best understood as part of this longer and broader discourse of young people and youth as problematic. This idea will be developed further in Chapter Three where we examine the notion of politics adult researchers apply in their investigations of young people's relationship to the political. As I will show in that chapter, the problem of young people's apathy and disengagement, as defined in the previous chapter, shifts to being a problem of what counts as politics, and the questions researchers ask or, indeed, do not ask, reveals more about their own sense of politics and how they think young people should be engaged. The problem thus moves from the apathy and disengagement of young people, to the question of 'Why are young people not doing politics and citizenship the way we did and the way we want/expect them to?' In other words, 'youth' comes to be understood as lack or deficit.

### **Youth as Deficit**

Having established youth as socially constructed and posited the notion that the discourse of youth apathy be couched within the broader discourse of youth as problem, it is now possible to develop this notion of youth by exploring youth as a relational concept. The approach to youth taken in this research follows Wyn and White (1997), in that it posits youth as a social construct, as outlined above, and as a concept which largely only makes sense in relation to the concept of adulthood. As we have seen, modern notions of youth



(or adolescence) highlight this period as one of *becoming*. Such a process of gestation can only make sense if adulthood is understood as *arrival*.<sup>14</sup>

Wyn and White (1997, p. 11) use the development of the concept of gender as illustrative and analogous to that of youth. During the 1960s and 1970s, sex role theory was the dominant paradigm for explaining the way gender worked, resting on the notion that gender is socially constructed and varies across time and culture. Sex role theory was important as it drew attention to inequalities between genders and the socially constructed (rather than biologically determined) origins of such inequalities, hence allowing some inroads to be made in challenging gender based inequalities. This approach, however, had some serious drawbacks, in that it positioned gender as primarily a learnt behaviour and paid short shrift to gender as an embodied experience (Connell, 1995). More significantly, it had no way of talking about the *relationship between* masculinities and femininities – masculine and feminine sex roles, while they may be socially constructed, were discrete identities. Sex role theory was superseded by an approach to gender that acknowledged the body, and furthermore the way masculinities and femininities are constructed in *relation* to each other. This means that masculinity is not simply different from femininity, but shaped in relation to it, having no meaning independent of this *relationship*.<sup>15</sup>

Taking such a *relational* approach to youth – as with gender – brings power to the forefront and allows us to see the way youth and adulthood are constructed through power relations. Jeffs and Smith make similar comments about the terms adolescent, teenager, youth, and young person:

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<sup>14</sup> The guidance and control thought necessary to help young people reach adulthood has already been noted. Jeffs and Smith (1998) discuss how youth work sees itself as providing such guidance and control and the notion of deficit this implies.

<sup>15</sup> Examples of this notion of gender can be seen in Connell's (1995) framework for masculinities where he conceptualises relations between men, but also between men and women, or in Plummer's (1999) research into homophobia and masculinity where the use of homophobic language can draw on misogynist meanings and work to subordinate particular forms of masculinity. More detailed discussions of gender as embodied and the theoretical shortcomings of sex role theory can be found in Connell (1995), Plummer (1999), and Skelton (2001).

*Each is relational, standing against notions of ‘adulthood’ and ‘childhood’. They are transitional states located between the two and imply deficiency. For example, they warn us that we are about to encounter behaviour or attitudes which are ‘less than adult’. Each is, somehow, a detached stage during which the individual focuses on preparation. (1998, p. 51)*

Such power relations between youth and adulthood have already been suggested above in the role that philosophers, educationalists, parents, policy makers, and moral entrepreneurs, among others, have played in shaping modern notions of youth. Clearly, a deficit notion of youth is applied by many of the researchers discussed in Chapter One, whose remedies for lack of political knowledge and participation were frequently further civics education. Beresford and Phillips’ (1997) notion that young people may “mature” into greater interest and involvement with politics similarly implies youth as deficient. And while Print et al.’s Youth Electoral Study (2004; 2005) counters the stereotype of young people as apathetic, claiming young people are interested in political issues, but not political parties and politicians, it was most disappointing to note that the title of the research team’s media release published on the University of Sydney’s website read, “Politics? It’s a turn-off, dude”.<sup>16</sup> The use of a word like ‘dude’ in this context seems somewhat patronising, and at the very least unnecessary, especially given the association of youth as ‘less than adult’ and youth as deficit (Jeffs and Smith, 1998). It seems most unlikely that older Australians would be treated the same way; imagine an inquiry into why older Australians are enrolled and tend to vote in higher numbers entitled, ‘Voting? Because it’s your civic duty, cobber!’

Indeed, the whole questioning of *young people’s* apathy reflects both notions of youth as problem, and deficient. Why is it that young people are “marked off from adults, as though apathy and engagement are youth problems alone?” (Harris and Bulbeck, forthcoming) As part of this broader narrative of young people as deficient and problem,

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<sup>16</sup> see, <http://www.usyd.edu.au/news/84.html?newsstoryid=105>

and of course hope for the future<sup>17</sup>, young people have become “the problem that must be investigated, analysed, discussed and fixed.” (Harris and Bulbeck, forthcoming) Here we can also note the connection between conceiving youth as deficit, and youth as problem; these two ways of understanding youth are intimately connected.

The ways in which adult society constructs youth and, in turn, the way young people respond, is a feature of the sociology of youth and a recurring theme of this thesis; clearly illustrated in Chapter Three where we examine the notions of politics researchers’ use to measure young people’s political participation and understanding.

### **Youth as Transition**

Rather than simply being a matter of semantics and how one conceives of youth, the notion of youth as deficient may have broader implications if the status of *lack* and *becoming*, as this notion defines youth, is in fact fallacious. Youth transitions research is one of the major traditions in the sociology of youth and largely adopts a deficit understanding of youth. The area of youth transitions focuses upon the way, “youth is constructed and structured through the institutions that “process” the transitions to adulthood” (Wyn and White, 1997, p. 5). A transitions approach holds the movement through schooling, further and higher education, and the labour market, as key institutions on the path to adulthood. The rudiments of this approach are that young people move in a unidirectional and implicitly linear way toward “some magical moment when adulthood is conferred” (Jeffs and Smith, 2008, p. 53). Yet, as Jeffs and Smith (1998, p. 53) point out, in recent years transitions researchers have had to talk of “delayed”, “broken”, “highly fragmented”, “elongated”, “extended” and “blocked” transitions, in their desperate attempt to hold on to the notion of youth transition whilst accurately describing the sorts of ways young people are using education and the labour

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<sup>17</sup> Of course, the discourse of youth as problem has its counter is the discourse of youth as hope for the future. Bessant’s (1993) historical analysis of the cultures of young Australian’s for the fifty years between 1900 and 1950 reveals two overarching themes. Youth as: threat and intrinsically bad; and as locus for hope and optimism and intrinsically good but vulnerable (redolent of Rousseau). Prout describes the approach to young people which highlights their future potential impact upon the world as “futuraity” (cited in White and Wyn, 2004, p. 84)

market (see Ball, Maguire and Macrae, 2000; du Bois-Reymond, 1998; Dwyer, Tyler and Wyn, 2001).<sup>18</sup>

There are a number of social and economic changes which are shaping and largely extending youth in developed countries, but the collapse of the youth labour market in these societies since the 1970s is undoubtedly a major factor. In the 1970s, approximately half of 15-19 year olds (50% of men and 46% of women) were in full-time employment, while in the 1990s this figure had fallen to twenty-two percent for men and thirteen percent for women (Dwyer, Tyler and Wyn, 2001, p. 37). Judy Schneider goes so far as to say, “Almost all options for obtaining an income sufficient for living above the (single person) poverty line have been lost to 15 – 17-year-olds.” (2000, p. 16)

Marriage and parenthood are also being ‘delayed’ when comparisons are made. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), the median age of first marriage in 2001 “was 29 years for men and 27 years for women, compared with 24 and 21 years respectively in 1976.” (ABS, 2005, p. 20) The same comparative study found that in “2001, 48% of births within a current relationship were to women aged 30 years and over, compared with 10% in 1976”. (ABS, 2005, p. 20)<sup>19</sup>

While today’s young people are more likely to be working part-time and are marrying and having children later, they are also living at home and studying longer. In 2001, living in the parental home was the most common living arrangement for people in their twenties, with thirty per cent living with at least one parent<sup>20</sup>, while in 1976 the figure was almost ten percent lower with twenty-one per cent living with at least one parent (ABS, 2005, p. 19). Highlighting these changes in living arrangements, the ABS says:

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<sup>18</sup> Of course one might also object to the way transitions approaches tend (particularly for young men) to position the attainment of full-time employment as signifying adulthood; a very narrow definition of adulthood indeed. In fact, there is evidence to suggest that at least some youth transitions researchers are calling for a broadening out of the dominance of work and education in transitions research (see Dwyer, Tyler and Wyn, 2001, p. 42).

<sup>19</sup> Indeed, as a consequence of this broad trend toward having children closer to one’s late twenties/early thirties, some parents who have had children in their early twenties have described the stigmatisation they have experienced, being stereotyped as irresponsible and poor decision makers (Donahoo, 2006).

<sup>20</sup> As we noted in the previous chapter, these changes in young people’s social circumstances have led to new terms like ‘Adultescent’ (Coulton, 2004).

*In 2001, 16% of people in their 20s were partners in a couple with children, compared with at least 40% of people in this age group in 1976. (2005, p. 18)*

Judy Schneider's (2000) study of "The Increasing Financial Dependency of Young People on Their Parents" used the ABS Income Distribution Surveys between 1982 and 1996 to systematically investigate the claim often made in youth policy literature that young people's financial dependency "on their parents is increasing and that this is likely to have an adverse effect on the well-being of young people, their families and the community in general." (p. 5) Overall she found an increase of 12 per cent in the proportion of young people supported by their family or having to survive on less than subsistence income. As suggested above, by 1996 almost all fifteen to seventeen year-olds were dependant (96 per cent in 1995-6, compared with 79 per cent in 1982). For eighteen to twenty year-olds the shift since 1982 towards the dependency of young people has meant that dependency has moved from being a less than usual situation (38 per cent in 1982) to being more than usual (62 per cent in 1995-6).<sup>21</sup>

Schneider's results reflect the considerable shift in the numbers of young people dependent upon their parents for financial support. During the course of these 14 years the collapse of the youth labour market meant those aged 15 to 17 years were dependent even if they did work (p. 16) and financial dependency for 18 to 20-year-olds became the norm at 62 per cent.

Linked with young people's increasing financial dependency has been the increase in school retention rates and further education (Schneider, 2000). The Australian Bureau of Statistics found that for both men and women, in 2001, when compared with 1976, participation in education was more likely, right through the ages of 20 to 29 years. The kind of qualifications gained has also changed, reflecting the shift towards higher education and away from vocational education, with those holding bachelor degrees more

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<sup>21</sup> Schneider found no overall shift in the twenty-one to twenty-four year-old age group's dependency rate, while there were some fluctuations (see pp. 17 – 18).

than doubling between 1976 and 2001 (13% in 1976 and 36% in 2001), while certificates have decreased from 67% in 1976 to 44% in 2001 (ABS, 2005, p. 21).

Longitudinal research from Australia's Life Patterns study further highlights the importance of post-school qualifications with its finding that as many as 80 per cent of participants, who at the time of completing high school chose not to do further study, ultimately returned to study over the next five years. More than half of the study's sample, some 57 per cent, gained more than one post-school qualification (Dwyer et al. 2003, cited in White and Wyn, 2004, p. 201).

In commenting on her own longitudinal research from the Netherlands, Du Bois-Reymond notes that one of the "most disturbing" findings was that these "young people do not like adulthood" (1998, p. 77). Rather than depicting young people as immature, Du Bois-Reymond was referring to young people's preference for blending different aspects of their lives – work, study, leisure, and personal relationships, in contrast to their parents' lives which were seen as dominated by work, debt and time consuming responsibilities.

At a broader level, the changes in young people's 'transition' to adulthood reflect social changes that have been occurring across the industrialised world for some decades. For social theorists like Giddens (1990; 1991) and Beck (1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; 2002), we are living in an age characterised by risk and uncertainty, where the processes of detraditionalisation and individualization mean people are increasingly responsible for creating their own lives, writing their own biographies – in Giddens' terms, undertaking the reflexive project of the self or self actualisation (1991). This does not mean institutions play no role in structuring the lives of individuals, but that institutions now demand individuals take control of their lives and any structuring role that institutions play is increasingly obscured.<sup>22</sup> As with institutions, tradition also recedes, meaning that less and less of one's life feels predetermined by the circumstances

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<sup>22</sup> Research on young people often reveals this sense of agency and choice (Du Bois-Reymond, 1998; Dwyer, et al. 2001; Wyn and Dwyer, 1999).

of one's birth. Many of these changes have their roots in the emancipatory politics of the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>23</sup>

The social forces of detraditionalisation, globalisation, and individualisation mean that life in risk society is a life of experience and experiment.<sup>24</sup> In Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's words "Inherited recipes for living and role stereotypes fail to function. There are no historical models for the conduct of life." (2002, p. 26) We saw this above with young people blending different aspects of their lives.

While we may prefer to adopt White and Wyn's (2004; see also Dwyer et al. 2001) measured approach to the post-1970s generation that sees a shifting of priorities for young people rather than Beck's and Giddens' radical break with the past, there can be little doubt that youth is being extended and the meaning of chronological age is becoming less clear. The significance of traditional markers of adulthood and the age at which they are achieved (if ever) has changed in industrialised countries (Wyn and Dwyer, 1999). Transitions that were previously considered the province of youth are increasingly taken up by different age groups, as evidenced by education and training more frequently occurring throughout one's life (ABS, 2005, pp. 20 – 21; Dwyer, Smith, Tyler and Wyn, 2003). While we may have reservations about the theses of Beck (1992) or Giddens (1991) and the slackening hold traditional social forms have over individuals' lives, leading to risk-biographies and detraditionalisation, it seems clear that, "whether we are discussing employment, education, family status or housing there is no longer (if there ever was) a point where 'final [adult] choices' are made." (Jeffs and Smith, 1998, pp. 53 – 55; see also Settersten, Furstenberg and Rumbaut, 2005) In the words of youth scholar, du Bois-Reymond (1998, p. 66):

*Status passages are no longer **linear** but **synchronical** and **reversible**. The life-course of modern young people does not necessarily follow the model of finishing school, completing professional training, getting engaged to be married, and then*

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<sup>23</sup> Indeed, Clive Hamilton believes that the future of progressive politics lies not in social justice or the politics of economic deprivation and distribution, but liberation and wellbeing (Hamilton, 2006).

<sup>24</sup> Lash (1999) also makes arguments for an experience based second modernity.

*beginning an active sex life; instead a sex life may commence while still at school, and a trial marriage may take place rather than an engagement. Moreover, there may be no marriage, no family and no heterosexual life, but planning one's career as a young woman and living together with one's girlfriend.* (emphasis in original)

If youth no longer make clear, linear, unidirectional transitions to adulthood, but in fact blend their engagement with education, work, and leisure activities, and if activities associated with youth, such as education, entering the labour or housing markets, cohabitating and so on occur across a range of ages, then youth cannot reasonably be thought of as teleological, reaching its proper end in adulthood. The relevance of this for the present research is that the institutions and practices of politics and citizenship which hold traditional markers of adulthood as a bedrock, need to respond to the changing circumstances of young people's lives or risk their marginalisation and exclusion.

### **T.H. Marshall, Young People's Citizenship & Youth Participation**

Discussion of modern notions of citizenship typically begin with T.H. Marshall's essays on citizenship and social class (Marshall, 1950). According to Roche (1992, p. 15), academic study of social policy and social citizenship was primarily forged by the work of Marshall and Richard Titmuss. While Marshall's work focused on the development of modern citizenship within a British context, his work was general enough to have wide-ranging application in Western societies. Indeed, Roche credits Marshall's conception of citizenship as part of the dominant paradigm, having great influence up until the 1970s (1992, see esp. pp. 16 – 23).

Marshall divided citizenship into three elements – civil, political and social. The civil component of citizenship related to the civil rights of individuals, “liberty of the person, freedom of speech, thought and faith, the right to own property and to conclude valid contracts, and the right to justice.” (1950, p. 10) The political dimension of citizenship provides for citizens to be involved in the exercise of political power, either “as a member of a body invested with political power or as an elector of such a body.” (1950, p. 11) While the social element of Marshall's citizenship basically relates to the welfare



state and its role in allowing citizens to exercise and access their civil and political rights. In Marshall's words:

*By the social element I mean the whole range from the right to a modicum of economic welfare and security to the right to share to the full in the social heritage and to live the life of a civilised being according to the standards prevailing in the society. The institutions most closely connected with it are the educational system and the social services. (Marshall, 1950, p. 11)*

As we can see, Marshall's notion of citizenship centres around rights-based claims against a state which has a duty to service its citizens. In turn, citizens have duties of their own, like the payment of taxes which would enable a state to deliver on universal social and economic rights, providing for social citizenship. Citizens are expected to take up paid work as part of this system, but Marshall did not believe in a state compelling its citizens to work. Citizens also have a responsibility to undertake civic duties, but this too should be taken up freely.

Prominent youth citizenship scholar Alan France says, "It is indisputable that Marshall's writings on citizenship were framed around the notion of adulthood." (1996, p. 29) Being a citizen, and hence a full member of the community, in Marshall's view involved traditional markers of adulthood like being involved in, typically, full-time, paid work, paying taxes, reaching the age of majority, voting and running for political office, and undertaking civil responsibilities. In parallel with a youth transitions approach, this view understands young people as citizens in training or potentia.

There are, however, some problems with Marshall's dominant citizenship paradigm for children and young people. In a recent article Wyness, Harrison and Buchanan (2004) argue that the relationship between young people and the world of politics has been neglected by social science (see also James and James, 2004, esp. pp. 30 – 47), and that this neglect reflects two sets of assumptions. Firstly, that young people largely do not inhabit civic or public spheres and hence are unable to tell adults anything new about the

political world. For many in Western societies, young people, and childhood in particular, are associated with the world of family and the personal or private sphere – Wyness et al., among others, have described this as part of the “privatisation of childhood” (2004, p. 83). Here, family is supposed to act as the “incubators for citizen potential” (Roche, 1992, p. 94), helping children along a seemingly linear (and chronological) path towards competent, complete citizenship and adulthood. However, as Wyness et al. note, there is no formal requirement within childhood for a level of civic or political maturation. Furthermore, such apprenticeships, if they do exist, are by definition privatised, and occur within “a political and educational vacuum.” (Wyness et al., 2004, p. 95) Civics education has only very recently undergone a revival in Australia (Owen, 1996) and according to Manning and Ryan (2004), citizenship education is slowly working its way into schools curriculum, yet New South Wales “is the only State in which civics is a compulsory and examined part of the curriculum.” (p. 5)

Connected with recent calls for civics education in schools has been the rise of programs and strategies designed to get young people involved in their local communities. Such programs and strategies include bodies like youth parliaments or the myriad of youth advisory committees for various levels of government (Saggers, Palmer, Royce, Wilson and Charlton, 2004). However, numerous youth scholars and researchers have noted the tokenism of most attempts at fostering youth participation (Bessant, 2003; Fahmey, 2003; Manning and Ryan, 2004; Matthews et al., 1998/9; Pint et al., 2005; White and Wyn, 2004). According to Wyness et al., “children and young people themselves are rarely given the opportunity to participate in agenda setting and the political establishment rarely seeks their views” (2004, p. 82).

Indeed, prominent Australian youth scholar Judith Bessant (2003) has recently described youth participation as a new way of “governing” and surveying young people. In her words:

*Youth participation as described in recent policy documents is a strategy for extending the management of young people rather than improving opportunities for*

*their democratic participation ... Youth participation is confined to specific issues that do not challenge the political power of policy makers on significant issues. There is no legislative or other framework operating, or proposed, that ensures what young people want or don't want will not be overridden by adults who disagree with the views expressed.* (pp. 91 and 98, emphasis in original)

Such tokenistic attempts at youth participation may very well contribute to the disengagement and disaffection of young people who get involved only to be greeted with vacant gestures (Manning and Ryan, 2004; Matthews et al. 1998/9; Print et al., 2005).

The second assumption Wyness et al. cite in explaining the general neglect of inquiry into the relationship between young people and politics rests upon the notion that children are incompetent<sup>25</sup> – recalling the deficit notion of youth – and do not have legitimate knowledge of the world, let alone a world such as the political, which we have already noted largely excludes the participation of young people and children. With such an approach to children and politics, children and adults are positioned as polar opposites, with the aforementioned social apprenticeship model used to usher children into adulthood. Wyness et al. layout the implications of such a polarisation of adults and children well when they say:

*In one sense, then, to base children's political exclusion in terms of incompetence is to say that adults qualify simply on the grounds of their adult status. At this ontological level, the question does not arise as to whether adults are interested in or motivated by politics. Adults are more or less interested or motivated according to choice, disposition and commitments. Adults are **of** the political world, and worthy of consideration as 'political animals'. Children, on the other hand and as*

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<sup>25</sup> Of course, many of our beliefs about children and young people's incompetence are based on psychology and its notions of childhood development. It is important to note that there is little consensus within the psychological community as to exactly when children reach a state of competence (see Wyness et al., 2004, p. 85).

*argued earlier, are located within the hidden private sphere and at best viewed as political animals in potentia.* (2004, pp. 85 – 86, emphasis in original)

Thus far we have identified some serious problems with Marshall's dominant citizenship paradigm in terms of how it relates to young people. There is a lack of formal and institutionalised citizenship education and training for young people, leaving it primarily in the hands of the private sphere; youth participation initiatives have repeatedly been identified as tokenistic and may operate as a new means of governing young people; and qualifying for political *gravitas* is based more upon polarised conceptions of childhood and adulthood than interest, motivation or the value of one's contribution. Furthermore, the changes occurring over the last thirty years, outlined above, which have further extended the period of youth, have in turn furthered young people's exclusion and marginalisation from a citizenship and politics built around traditional markers of adulthood.

Before leaving this discussion of young people and citizenship, it is worthwhile examining the recent attempts at encouraging young people's involvement with political/citizenship roles through youth participation strategies. Youth participation in its many forms (Saggers et al., 2004) is one of the major attempts at including young people in decision-making and getting them involved with their local community. As noted above, however, such participation strategies have repeatedly been identified as tokenistic<sup>26</sup>, and in Judith Bessant's (2003; see also Marinetto, 2003) view they mark a new means of governing young people. One of the major problems with these participatory structures is that they rarely impart political or decision making power to the young people involved (Bessant, 2003; Fahmey, 2003; Manning and Ryan, 2004;

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<sup>26</sup> During the course of my research I became involved in a youth group connected to a city council which had experienced serious problems with its own youth advisory group. As a result, the way the council included and consulted young people was restructured. At a meeting to discuss the new relationship between the council and young people, it was suggested that the new model was still tokenistic in so far as the Councillors had no reason to accept any contribution made by young people. To this the group was told by a member of the council's staff involved in designing the new model that it was more "*manipulative*" than tokenistic, but it was the only option open to young people wanting the chance to contribute. This experience is a classic example of Bessant's (2003) claim that youth participation is often more about governing and surveying young people than an introduction to consultative participatory democracy where young people are actually involved in the decision making process.

Matthews et al. 1998/9; Print et al., 2005; White and Wyn, 2004). Underlying this is a criticism which relates more broadly to social capital and youth participation initiatives that uncritically adopt its implicit mantra of 'Get involved! Any community involvement is good'.

When participation becomes an end in and of itself, politics or what Nina Eliasoph (1998, pp. 14 -16) calls 'public spirited conversations', can be curtailed. As Judith Bessant (2003) notes, youth participation has virtually reached the status of automatic inclusion in youth policy documents. But if this participation is ultimately politically toothless for the young people involved, as many youth participation initiatives both in Australia and the UK have been characterised, it can actually further young people's disaffection and disillusionment with political systems. Moreover, as Nina Eliasoph showed in her excellent study of the way Americans produce apathy in everyday contexts, participation for its own sake does not necessarily allow people the opportunity to question the form that their participation will take. Many social capital initiatives, and youth participation is no exception, can be understood as fundamentally conservative and working to maintain the *status quo*. If community involvement, whatever form it takes, is simply about volunteering within pre-existing structures to ensure, for example, services in the local community are maintained, then those volunteers are not given the opportunity to think through and question the how's, why's, what's, and for whom of their volunteering efforts – or indeed why government is not providing the service which their volunteering meets. To take an example from youth participation, if the young people involved in a committee advising a city council are not given any say in the decision making process but merely consulted, if they cannot set their own agenda or be given scope to develop their own initiatives, then they are denied an important part of community involvement, namely politics. Such participation structures might be best described as 'limited needs-based participation', where the needs of the community and the participation required to meet those needs have been defined by an exterior body and what is necessary are individuals to volunteer their time, skills, and bodies to meet those needs. There is no room within this kind of participation to question or rethink the needs of the community

or how best to meet them. Any conversations undertaken by volunteers would be located within a context in which their task has already been defined and decided.

Nina Eliasoph makes this point in reference to President Bush Senior's "Thousand Points of Light" volunteer strategy:

*"The "thousand points of light"-style volunteer in contrast, simply tries to fix predefined social problems, and coolly avoids seizing the power to define political issues. The potential power generated in the friction of the public sphere is absent from the "thousand points of light" volunteer-style involvement. This is a cultural kind of power, the power to open up public contexts for citizens to question, challenge, debate; the power to become a different kind of person, to create new meanings and ask new questions; to inspire."* (Eliasoph, 1998, p. 14)

The relevance of this critique of simplistic social capital and youth participation initiatives is firstly, that it adds to the existing criticisms of tokenism levelled at youth participation. Secondly, while it is widely recognised that youth participation generally does not mean actually involving young people in decision making processes, we can now see how they may not even be providing young people with the space to engage in political conversations, allowing them to develop crucial citizenry skills like defining political issues or imagining how things could be better. Youth participation may be so task-oriented that it indeed delimits political conversations. Where these critiques lead us is firstly, to call for the *genuine* involvement of young people in decision-making processes, and secondly, and most significantly for the current research, to pursue a broader definition of politics.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has argued that the 'youth as apathetic and disengaged' discourse is best understood as part of a broader historical discourse which defines young people as deficit and problem. It was argued that much of the research discussed in the previous chapter held such a deficit understanding of young people. The potted history of youth illustrated

some of the ways in which youth has been shaped and constituted through history and highlights the socially constructed nature of youth. It was also argued that youth be understood as relational, only having meaning in relation to adulthood. Such a relational perspective underwrites the power relations between youth and adulthood, and that if youth is understood as a period of *deficit, development, and becoming*, then adulthood must, by implication, mean *completeness, maturity, arrival*. The idea that youth is indeed a period of transition was scrutinised and found to largely be fallacious under modern social conditions. Having problematised the notion of a linear transition to adulthood, there was a brief discussion of the implications this may hold for young people's political engagement given that dominant models of citizenship hold traditional markers of adulthood as a bedrock. This was followed by a discussion of youth participation strategies and their attempt at including young people in political/citizenry roles. These initiatives are frequently found to be tokenistic, potentially furthering young people's disengagement, and may also operate as a new means of controlling and surveying young people. This section was concluded by arguing that some forms of youth participation and social capital may indeed be so task-oriented as to delimit the very possibility of politics.

The following chapter will expand upon conceptions of politics by examining the model of politics adult researchers have applied in their research of young people and politics.

# Chapter 3

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## Conceptualising Politics

### Introduction

This thesis is a qualitative examination of the discourse which claims young people are apathetic and disengaged from politics. Chapter One canvassed evidence for the case that young people are in fact apathetic and disengaged. The previous chapter showed that this evidence holds youth to be a period of becoming, typically a linear transition to adulthood, which does not match the contemporary experience of youth. Youth 'lifestyles' frequently extend through one's twenties, as young people experiment and blend different aspects of their lives. In light of these changes, new ways of including young people in political/citizenry activities were discussed, and found wanting. This chapter will examine the second faulty assumption the discourse of apathetic and disengaged youth relies upon. Returning to the research discussed in Chapter One, it will be argued that these studies unreflexively apply narrow and unproblematised notions of politics, notions which arose in the eighteenth century and assume their own universality. These studies assume politics has an agreed meaning and imply it is an unchanging practice. This section will include a discussion of research which counters the 'youth as apathetic' discourse. From here an historical turn will be taken, uncovering the origins of this narrow and classical liberal variant of politics. It will be argued that this understanding of politics is indeed hegemonic, entails a particular notion of the self, and a public/private split. Following this will be a discussion of contemporary research and theory which problematises some of the core assumptions of the narrow liberal conception of politics, in particular the public/private divide. These contemporary studies are useful for this thesis because they indicate that the narrow, regulatory model of liberal politics, first pioneered during the Scottish Enlightenment, and which over time has



become the dominant hegemonic model for politics in Western societies, is not the only way politics can be done.

## **Problematizing Politics**

The research discussed in Chapter One almost entirely conceives of politics as having an agreed upon shared meaning, and much of it implies politics is a static and unchanging practice. The meaning of politics is not open for discussion or negotiation. Yet how can we be sure researchers and participants do indeed share an understanding of politics? Especially in light of the repeated finding that young people lack interest and knowledge of politics, it seems entirely possible for participant and researcher to be talking past one another. When Mackay, Print et al., Beresford and Phillips, Bulbeck, or Lean use the term 'politics', just what do they mean?

As we shall see below, there is a body of research countering that which bolsters the young people as apathetic and disengaged discourse. In recent years a counter-discourse has emerged which draws upon the insight of youth subculture research which shows that young people can create meanings (for example see, Cashmore, 1979; Clarke, 1975; Hall and Jefferson, 1976; Cohen, 1972; Hebdige, 1976, 1979; Jefferson, 1976; Willis, 1977), ergo they can be political agents and create new and different forms of political meaning and practice

The research previously discussed by Bulbeck, which paints young people as largely not engaged with politics, was published in an article with co-author Anita Harris. In this most useful and illuminating paper, we find occasion for a rare exchange, wherein a meaningful dialogue occurs across political understandings. It is through this exchange that Bulbeck identifies her political orientations and suggests how they shape her research practice. She says:

*I have also been made aware of how much my understanding of young people's political engagements are read against the yardstick of 1970s definitions of politics. (Harris and Bulbeck, forthcoming)<sup>27</sup>*

Here we see Professor Bulbeck being reflexive about her research, identifying some of the ways in which she helps construct the findings of her research. This methodological reflexivity or honesty is relatively rare for any, but particularly, quantitative research of young people and politics. And it clearly shows that at least part of what frames such research is the question, 'Why aren't young people doing politics and citizenship the way we did and the way we want/expect them to?'

Bulbeck takes a familiar approach to the measurement of engagement by looking at activities like signing a petition, joining a party, or writing to a politician.<sup>28</sup> Harris, on the other hand, interrogates the meaning of engagement/disengagement, apathy, and cynicism, questioning standard notions of what counts as engagement and non-engagement. Harris asks:

*Is it more 'engaged' to sign a petition on the way through a shopping mall, or to choose not to vote from a deep reflection on the problems of the system of government? Can a negative activity, a withdrawal of support, also be considered as a political act? (Bulbeck and Harris, forthcoming)*

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<sup>27</sup> Naomi Klein (2000) also notes the way new forms of politics are often understood in terms of older models:

*This is the flip side of the persistent criticism that the kids on the street lack clear leadership – they lack clear followers too. To those searching for replicas of the sixties, this absence makes the anticorporate movement appear infuriatingly impassive: Evidently, these people are so disorganised they can't even get it together to respond to perfectly well-organized efforts to organize them. These are MTV-weaned activists, you can practically hear the old guard saying: scattered, nonlinear, no focus. (p.1)*

Melucci describes similar criticisms: "But who cares about them? They seem more interested in themselves than in the outer world, they apparently ignore politics, they don't fight against power. They don't have big leaders, organization seems quite inefficient, disenchantment has superseded great ideals" (1985, p. 809 – 810; see also Lichterman, 1999, p. 118).

<sup>28</sup> This has become the typical way of measuring political participation or engagement (see Bean, 1989; McAllister, 1997; White, Bruce and Ritchie, 2000)

Following the lead of United Kingdom (UK) researcher Bhavnani (1991), Harris questions the characterisation of young people who are not engaged as *apathetic* and asks if it is not in fact cynicism – rather than apathy – that they display. Bhavnani argues that cynicism, as opposed to apathy, implies some form of political analysis and critique, and thus some level of *engagement*, even if the individual decides not to engage further. This means choosing to be disengaged can be a political act and further, that cynicism “may even act as an *impetus* for political activity.” (Bhavnani, 1991, p. 13, emphasis in original) In Harris’ work, this form of ‘active disengagement’ can be seen in young people who choose not to get involved because of

*... deep suspicion of the formal political process. They feel excluded, that their issues are not taken seriously, and that the state is not likely to work in the interest of social justice.* (Bulbeck and Harris, forthcoming)

In a series of articles (1999; 2001; 2003; 2004; Harris and Bulbeck, *forthcoming*), Harris draws upon research she has undertaken in a number of countries with young women engaged in the trans-national culture of producing ‘zines’ (be they web-based or print-based). She argues that these zines, generated out of a punk DIY (do it yourself) ethos, are largely a means of winning space for young women to: express feminist politics and pursue and create discussion about its political objectives (1999); challenge dominant narratives about youth citizenship “in a project of redefining and reclaiming politics and citizenship” (2001, p. 183, see also Harris, 2004; Harris and Bulbeck, *forthcoming*); challenge, deconstruct and parody contemporary notions of girlhood which typically centre around notions of ‘girlpower’ and girls as risk-takers (2003).

Returning to the notion of ‘active disengagement’ for a moment, Harris argues that the young women in her study:

*... politicise apathy and cynicism as active resistance to a postindustrial state unworthy of their engagement. ... In other words, they do not want to be included in*

*a system they find structurally problematic but would rather change this structure.*  
(2001, p. 194 195)

Clearly, these young women, regardless of how they would score on a measure of participation like that of Bulbeck's, are highly engaged in the social and political world around them, as evidenced by their powerful criticisms and their questioning of the way things are currently structured. By calling into question the way things work and asking how they might be different or better, these young women are *doing politics* or what Nina Eliasoph has called public-spirited conversations (1998). To quote Harris again:

*... these young women offer ways of conceiving youth citizenship that open up the possibility of direct intervention into political systems, an approach that firstly asks questions of the state before seeking inclusion, and has the thrilling arrogance to presume that young people are entitled to conduct this kind of interrogation of their social worlds in the first place.* (2001, p. 197)

As we saw in the previous chapter, the importance of young people asking questions about their participation and the system in which such participation will take place cannot be underestimated. In fact, it is one of the central tenets of this thesis that such questioning and interrogation is an integral part of politics, in contrast to mere participation.

The approach that Harris employs in her research and the way she understands young people and their relationship with politics ironically aligns her with comments made by youth scholar Ken Roberts. These two make for strange bedfellows because Roberts is largely conservative and Harris, as we have already noted, is anything but conservative. Nonetheless, if we follow Roberts' claim that "youth research is sustained by young people posing constant questions for the authorities and adult society in general" (2003, p. 14), the kind of young person he suggests is found in Harris' work, that is, a young person (usually a young woman in Harris' work) who is a socio-political actor, knowledgeable, reflective, and creatively engaged in their social world. How else could

they be producing new forms of politics which in turn pose problems for the established categories of youth participation researchers, the organisers of meetings of the World Trade Organization, the G8, or “adult society in general”? As Harris notes:

*Ironically, much of the discussion about youth participation excludes young people from framing the issues and seeking solutions. To take seriously the possibility of young people as reflective and knowledgeable socio-political actors means regarding them as more than data.* (Harris and Bulbeck, forthcoming)

### ***The counter-discourse***

Research like that of Harris (1999; 2001; 2003; 2004; Harris and Bulbeck, forthcoming; Vromen, 2003), are in part framed by the terms of the ‘youth as apathetic and disengaged’ discourse. They are responding within the terms of this debate by arguing that young people are in fact politically engaged, but in new ways, different from those of ‘old style’ activists. Harris argues that if one wants to defend young people from the charges of apathy and disengagement, this is one of only two options open; the other concedes young people are not engaged in politics, but points to “compelling socio-economic reasons why that might be so.” (Harris and Bulbeck, forthcoming) Such an approach to the ‘youth as apathetic discourse’ views apathy as a *symptom* and not an end result; as a product of a political system and society which marginalizes, if not ignores, young people. For Harris, this means that the focus remains on *youth* and *their* problem with politics. She suggests, contrary to popular claims that apathy and engagement are problems only for young people, the panic over youth apathy and disengagement may be diverting “attention from the dwindling public sphere and the disengagement of adults.” (Harris and Bulbeck, forthcoming).

In fact, Harris’ suggestion that disengagement and apathy are not only problems of the young, are reflected in some of the results of research from the United Kingdom (POWER Inquiry, 2006).<sup>29</sup> Helen Wilkinson prepared a report for the All Party

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<sup>29</sup> See Appendix A for a discussion of the UK research which forms part of the counter to the ‘youth as apathetic and disengaged’ discourse.

Parliamentary Group for Children in May 1996, which argues that while young people may be the vanguard of disengagement from party politics, older age groups are riding their coat-tails:

*These trends are not unique to Britain. Countries worldwide confront the same problem – in Australia, Germany, America and France – everyone is concerned about young people’s disaffection with party politics. **Nor is the problem confined to the young.** The Demos analysis found the same growing disconnection in the 30s, 40s and 50s age bands. **It seems that young people are expressing a general phenomenon more acutely.** A MORI poll showed that the numbers of people dissatisfied with Parliament has doubled in the 4 years since 1991. (Wilkinson, 1996, p. 243, emphasis added)*

These findings are also supported by Putnam’s analysis, discussed in Chapter One. In this view, young people, their disengagement and apathy are part of a longer and more general historical process. Unfortunately, this perspective does not prevent its proponents from proffering accusations and derogatory characterisations of young people. In Wilkinson’s words:

*... it would be easy to conclude that the new generation are the switched off-generation – the political equivalents of MTV and Beavis and Butthead. (1996, p. 242)*

A recent research paper by Henn, Weinstein and Wring (2002) further contributes to the counter discourse of apathetic youth. The real worth of their efforts, however, lie in the interpretations they offer of young people’s disengagement from politics and in their calling attention to the assumed common understanding much quantitative research maintains exists between researcher and participant. While Henn et al. do not directly take up this challenge in their own research; they have drawn attention to a potentially fatal flaw in much quantitative research on young people and politics. In their words:

*Political science tends to rely heavily upon quantitative techniques, such as questionnaire-based political surveys. Such an approach assumes that a common understanding exists between the researcher and the research participant about the definition and the meaning of politics; it is arguable that this common meaning may well not exist, and that studies reliant on such an approach may not, by themselves, fully address what (young) people perceive the 'political' to be. (Henn et al., 2002, p. 169)*

We have already noted the unproblematic and unreflexive use of the term politics in several of the pieces of research discussed thus far, and particularly in relation to Bulbeck we have seen how such use of 'politics' can structure research in particular ways. Manning and Ryan have responded to the claims from Henn et al. and related them to their study of *Youth and Citizenship* (2004). Manning and Ryan altered their research design from one based on quantitative methods to one which included a significant qualitative component, "in order to reflect the increased validity of qualitative methods in this subject area." (2004, p. 15)

Their study draws upon a national survey, telephone interviews, and focus groups conducted "in a range of locations in Western Australia, New South Wales, and Tasmania with young people ranging in age from 13 to 25 (including a group of Indigenous young people from Cape York and Brisbane)." (p. 19) While the survey has some limitations – namely a relatively small sample size and self-selection rather than random sampling – the authors in part used the quantitative findings to inform the qualitative dimension of their research. Also, specific groups who were under-represented in the survey sample were targeted for inclusion in the qualitative research (see p. 18 – 19).

The quantitative phase of research asked young people how they define citizenship in an abstract sense. The highest level of support was for the two definitions which referred to citizenship as being about a set of rights and duties relating to participation in society. There was also strong support for citizenship being about community and participating in

decisions that affect you. Interestingly, the notion of citizenship as international and being about “our relationship with all the people of the world.” (p. 39) scored higher than citizenship being about nationalism and sharing a common culture.

Young people reported experiencing unequal power relationships with a wide range of institutions and groups in society. “Government and business groups were seen as the most remote and those over which young people exercise the least influence. ... The respondents indicated that governments at all levels have a much greater level of power over them than they have over governments.” (p. 44 and 47) These results again reflect the common finding that young people feel politicians and governments to be unresponsive to their interests and views.

Another familiar finding was that 89 per cent “of respondents felt that young people do want to participate in influencing politics and government” (p. 49). Young people listed education, relationships, employment, money, and youth suicide as the top five issues they were interested in (p. 42). Again we can note that these interests largely lie beyond the focus of mainstream politics. There was also strong support for the teaching of Australia’s legal and political systems, and citizenship, again reflecting other Australian results.

One of the key findings from the qualitative stage of the research was that participants did not share a definition of citizenship. While young people’s notions of what citizenship is conflicted with each other, “many of the participants are able to hold two or more conflicting definitions at once”. “A great many” participants said they had not thought about citizenship before and that being involved in this research had made them think more deeply about it (p. 83).<sup>30</sup>

Of great importance for research with young people on politics and citizenship is that many participants defined citizenship as membership of any group(s). That this

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<sup>30</sup> This result is broadly reflected in the findings of the present research; almost all interviewees claimed they had not given much thought to why they were or were not involved in differing forms of social/political participation.



interpretation of citizenship was “widespread” (p. 79) among participants adds further empirical weight to Henn et al.’s claims about the potential for researcher and participant to be talking past one another without the researcher having any idea they are each applying different meanings. Not only is it clear that young people held a range of different interpretations of citizenship – including national identity, rights and duties, participation, formal status, and belonging and community (see pp. 64 – 81) – many of them also held contradictory notions and “unexpected” (p. 79) notions, like belonging to a group.

To Manning and Ryan’s credit, they used the focus groups as an opportunity to interrogate some of the findings of the survey data. One finding discussed was “why so few survey respondents agreed with the statement that ‘Australia is a democratic country’”. Some of the younger participants said that they did not know what ‘democracy’ means, but that it sounded positive so they would agree with the statement. Others equated democracy with fair, and so therefore would disagree with the statement. While some of the older participants said that when they were younger they would have been more likely to agree with the statement, their sense of democracy has changed over time and now find themselves more ambivalent. Much like citizenship, young people interpret democracy in a range of ways, which of course holds serious implications for the interpretation of data which uses words like citizenship, or democracy, or politics, in unproblematised and unreflexive ways.

Similarly, in the focus groups many young people said that while they acknowledge citizenship is in part about exclusion and discrimination, such definitions sound negative and hence they would not want to agree with them.

*Many participants also said they would have chosen the international or cosmopolitan definition of citizenship in the survey rather than the nationalist definition even though it directly contradicts their real perceptions, because they thought it sounded better. (p. 9)*

Clearly, researchers need to be aware, particularly when discussing subjects young people may have little knowledge or experience of, there is a very real potential for them to effectively be speaking different languages. Furthermore, these findings highlight the contested and unfixed nature of terms like politics and citizenship. Underscoring these points, research like Manning and Ryan's also call attention to the need for researchers to consider their research from young people's perspective. In Chapter One, when discussing Bulbeck's work, we noted she gave little consideration to how young people's feelings of disconnection from politics may relate to their perception of politics as boring and/or irrelevant to their lives. Also in Chapter One, Hannam drew our attention to the frustration that can result from teaching civics without any accompanying form of practice, comparing it to reading holiday brochures in prison.<sup>31</sup> And returning to Print et al's 2004 report from the Youth Electoral Study we can find a further example.

The authors raise concern over young people's lack of "excitement" for voting and that few young people link voting with other rites of passage. While the vast majority of young people think it is important to vote (81.9 %), 65.9 percent of students think voting is boring and nearly sixty percent think it a hassle (p. 16). Print et al. also asked young people to rank various rites of passage according to how exciting they were, these included: "Your 18<sup>th</sup> birthday"; "Graduate from school"; "Get a driver's license"; "The end of school formal"; "Be able to drink legally" and "Vote in a Government election". These items were to be ranked on a scale from one (not at all exciting) to four (very exciting), with "your 18<sup>th</sup> birthday" coming in top at a score of 3.62 and "vote in a government election" last at 1.8. The authors state that these findings mean few young people feel voting in their first election exciting – nor do they associate voting with other rites of passage.

From an adult's point of view, the finding that students are unexcited by voting and do not associate it with other rites of passage, may well be cause for concern. If, however, we approach these findings from the position of young people themselves, while such a

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<sup>31</sup> Indeed, Print et al. (2005) have highlighted models of teaching civics which involve specific class exercises, rather than simply acquiring knowledge of civics, government, and politics.

finding may still be cause for concern (particularly when coupled with the strongly negative findings about voting being boring, a waste of a Saturday, and a hassle), we can see good reasons for it not holding excitement or being equated with other rites of passage. As argued in the previous chapter, politics, and particularly voting, are divorced from young people's worlds (again we can note the influence of thinkers like Rousseau). Currently in Australia there is little teaching about politics or citizenship in schools and young people must be eighteen before they can vote, and yet, when in a study of *secondary students* (only some of whom have actually voted – at this stage the numbers of those who have voted are not detailed in the report) overwhelmingly say voting is important but we do not find it exciting or equate it with other rites of passage, the researchers seem surprised and raise concerns for the future of democracy. Furthermore, it seems the researchers take some liberties in concluding from these findings that:

*... voting is not seen as part of transition to adulthood by students. Turning eighteen, attending 'schoolies', obtaining a drivers licence and leaving school are all far more **important** rites of passage.* (emphasis added, p. 23)

The authors jump from a question that asked the students to rank a number of “rite-of-passage” events in order of “excitement”, to making claims about how young people rank the *importance* of such “rite-of-passage” events. As we have seen, nearly eighty-two percent of young people agreed that voting was *important*; it seems misleading to say that since voting was not seen as being as exciting as turning eighteen that therefore voting is not as *important* as turning eighteen. If the students were asked to rank a number of rite-of-passage events in terms of importance, the results may well have been different<sup>32</sup>.

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<sup>32</sup> A further question which could be asked in this context connects with Anita Harris' work on young women and politics discussed above: Why is it of particular concern that *young people* find turning eighteen more exciting than voting? How do we know that the population at large does not share this view, reflecting cultural values rather than the apathy or disengagement of young people? There is also a case to be made for the other “rite-of-passage” events having a much more everyday and tangible impact on the lives of young people than the singular act of voting in one's first election. It seems quite reasonable that one would find the idea of (graduating from school, getting a drivers licence, the end of school formal, legally being able to drink or) a large party held in one's honour with friends and family celebrating one's arrival at adult status, more exciting than making the trip to participate in a system one has *no* experience

Beyond these criticisms, when a broader notion of politics/participation is employed, research has found young people *are* actively engaged in community life. Ariadne Vromen's (2003) paper titled '*People Try to Put Us Down...': Participatory Citizenship of 'Generation X'*' argues that contrary to popular notions of "'Generation X' having homogenous or negligible participatory experiences, four distinct participatory typologies emerge." (p. 79) Following Prokhovnik's (1998) feminist re-conceptualisation of inclusive citizenship, Vromen takes up her charge that citizenship, and in turn participatory research, should "recognize what people actually do" (p. 95).

Vromen's research is partly framed by the reluctance of Australian political science to go beyond formal political institutions in its investigations of political participation (Bean, 1989; McAllister, 1997).<sup>33</sup> Her research moves beyond standardised participation questionnaires having an experiential focus, allowing the development of typologies of participation from the forms of participation the young people in her survey report undertaking.

Again, Vromen found that very few young Australians (Vromen's data is drawn from a broadly representative random sample, see pp. 83 – 84) are involved with political parties. Even union membership for this sample was only twenty-seven per cent (p. 86). In contrast, up to 22 per cent of young people have been involved with an activist group at some stage. Individualised forms of participation like making a donation (96%), volunteering time (67%), and boycotting product(s) (57%) were the most frequently undertaken forms of participation. Not surprisingly, the numbers decrease for contacting

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of, feels disconnected from and lacking proper knowledge about. Matthews, Limb, Harrison, and Taylor describe young people's distance from politics well when they say, "...within the UK a young person is deemed criminally responsible at the age of 10, sexually competent at the age of 16, but not politically responsible until the age of 18, when suddenly, without training or rehearsal, young people enjoy the right to suffrage." (1998/9, p. 19)

<sup>33</sup> Revisiting Lean's (1996) work from Chapter One, we can see that at times she understands politics in a broad way:

*When youths think about traffic jams on the main arterial in the morning or lowering the probationary drivers' licence age or introducing a new brand of food into the canteen, they are thinking politically.* (p. 59)

Yet her questionnaire uses the word politics unproblematically, never calling the meaning of politics into question. Furthermore, she has no suggestions about how a more inclusive notion of politics might be brought into the lives of young people (or indeed, mainstream politics) and made meaningful.

an elected official (25%), and further for attending a rally (19%), with those more educated and urban dwellers more likely to have taken part (p. 86). 70 per cent of the sample had been involved with a sporting or recreation group; Vromen accounts for this high figure through the age of the sample involved (p. 87).

One of Vromen's key findings is that in contrast to the way mainstream Australian research on political participation typically finds men to participate at higher levels than women (McAllister, 1997, p. 246 - 7), or suggests a levelling of differences (Smith, 2001), "when a broader definition of participation is applied empirically, particularly one that is inclusive of community-based activity, women's participation becomes more apparent." (p. 91) Vromen found women to have significantly higher means on two of her four scales of participation, namely the activist and communitarian scales (see pp. 92 – 93). Women also had "a significantly higher average total number of participatory acts than men, which tends to suggest that women are more open to a range of political acts, depending on the cause or issue." (p. 96) While education was a significant variable in only five of the participatory acts, its cumulative affect meant that overall higher levels of education were significantly associated with all four scales of participation. The third trend Vromen identifies from her findings is young people's preference for more individualised forms of participation; however she also noted that a majority of young people also engaged in boycotting practices and that this could be used to mobilise 'Generation X'.

Vromen finds in stark contrast to claims that there is a 'crisis' in the political and civic engagement of young Australians that 93 per cent of her broadly representative sample have had involvement with or membership of a group of some kind<sup>34</sup> (p. 96). She argues that the political participation of 'Generation X' has been underestimated and that we

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<sup>34</sup> Even when sporting and recreation groups are taken out of this calculation, the figure is still around the 70% mark (69% not including party or union and professional association membership, or 73% when they are included) (p. 89). Vromen's finding that young people are not the slackers of 'Generation X' is also broadly reflected by recent work from the Australian Bureau of Statistics. They found that in 2002, 28 per cent of 18-24 year olds had undertaken voluntary work in the previous twelve months. This figure is matched with a rate of 29 per cent for 25-34 year olds (ABS, 2006).

need to broaden our traditional ways of understanding participation if we wish to acknowledge the participation of this generation of political actors<sup>35</sup>.

In another paper drawing upon the same data set, Vromen showed that “becoming a parent does not decrease, or change levels of participation for this age group [18 to 34 years] of political actors.” (2003a, p. 291) Through an investigation of participation and perceived time constraints (for example, family or work) and political participation, Vromen found that traditional gendered divisions between public and private sphere responsibilities still applied to this generation, “principally when individuals become parents.” (p. 291) In regard to the “increasingly higher levels of well educated women not having children, it becomes clear that women are still forced into making choices that men do not have to make: choices between prioritising their public and private sphere commitments.” (p. 291) In line with other feminists, Vromen argues it is not enough for the public sphere to be democratised while the private sphere, specifically when women have children, remains the province of undemocratic gendered responsibilities. These considerations of gender and participation also draw attention to the gender dimensions of young people’s rejection of “institutionalized party political forms of participation in preference for informal, group-based, and issue-centred forms of participation, which are also conducive to women’s involvement.” (p. 292)

Thus far it has been argued that much of the research discussed in Chapter One, which forms part of the discourse of youth apathy and disengagement, applies the term ‘politics’ in a non-reflexive and unproblematised fashion. As we saw with Bulbeck, this can mean, “young people’s political engagements are read against the yardstick of 1970s definitions of politics.” Such an approach betrays the underlying question shaping the research: ‘Why aren’t young people doing politics and citizenship the way we did and the way we want/expect them to?’ Through the work of Harris and others we saw the important semantic distinction between apathy and cynicism; where cynicism is understood as

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<sup>35</sup> These findings from Vromen are supported by recent research from the UK which argued for politics to be understood as going beyond Westminster (POWER Inquiry, 2006), and that with this broadening out of politics, young people are no less engaged than older people (Pattie, Seyd, Whiteley, 2003, cited in Johnson and Marshall, 2004, p. 13, also see Roker, Player and Coleman, 1999).

involving engagement and critique. This distinction underlines the importance of treating young people as more than data, acknowledging that young people can be conscious socio-political actors, creating their own political meanings and practices in response to their socio-political context. Other studies have further highlighted the need to open up the meaning of the political, finding that researcher and participant may not indeed share an understanding of essential terms like politics and citizenship. In parallel, a number of criticisms were levelled at the research examined in Chapter One, in so far as they fail to consider issues from young people's perspective. Finally, through Vromen's work we have seen that when a broader notion of politics/participation is employed, young people are far from the stereotype of Generation X slackers.

This discussion demonstrates that, just as with the concept of youth, the concept of politics is historical, contested and shifting. In order to understand why many researchers operate with a narrow understanding of politics, it is necessary to examine the historical roots of such a model of politics – the assumptions it holds about human beings, human activity and social relationships. I want now to show that this dominant conceptualisation of politics is actually the product of particular cultural and historical forces born in the early phases of modernity, specifically those of classical liberalism. I want to turn to this liberalism and show how its key assumptions were shaped by the new and changing social realities of its time, and how they have become less relevant in our age of late modernity, and thus how maintaining its notion of politics obscures and narrows our vision of what is occurring in contemporary social reality.

Having begun the process of opening up the meaning of the political, I shall now turn to the historical origins of the narrow liberal model of politics implicitly invoked by the research reviewed in Chapter One, and, at a more general level, the discourse of apathetic and disengaged youth.

## Historical Origins of The Narrow Liberal Model of Politics<sup>36</sup>

Firstly, it is important to recognise that contemporary understandings of politics are a historical product, and as suggested above, constantly being shaped by the societies and cultures in which they are implicated. During the eighteenth century, in concert with the great transformations taking place across European societies (Polanyi, 1957), philosophers began to grapple with the implications these social changes held for the workings of society. While the changes taking place during the eighteenth century were clearly not isolated, having their antecedence in the effects of increasing mercantilism, the Protestant Reformation, the Renaissance, scientific developments and so on, the eighteenth century is important for the present argument as it marks the period in which many of our current ideas about the role of politics and ethics/morality in society were established. For our purposes it is sufficient for discussion to focus upon the work of Scottish Enlightenment philosophers and Immanuel Kant in shaping the modern, hegemonic understanding of politics as holding a largely legalistic and regulatory function, where ethical life is sequestered from politics and privatised as a function of family life and private interactions. Some of the implications these changes hold for the modern self will also be discussed.

### *The 'Great Transformation' and civic humanism versus natural law*

As noted above, the eighteenth century was a time of great and fundamental social and cultural change for much of Europe. Urban centres swelled with the incessant call for workers, and individuals experienced a profound change and disembedding of social relations. A lifestyle centred round the home, cottage industry, and family and village life shifted to one encompassing a wider range of interactions and greater social distance. Local community life came to be replaced with an urban lifestyle revolving around the demands of wage labour and the market (Polanyi 1957; Tronto, 1993). In Karl Polanyi's words:

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<sup>36</sup> I am indebted to Jacky Morris' thesis (2003) for helping me understand this history.



*To separate labor from all other activities of life and to subject it to the laws of the market was to annihilate all organic forms of existence and to replace them by a different type of organization, an atomistic and individualistic one [...] The application of the principal of freedom of contract...meant that the noncontractual organizations of kinship, neighborhood, profession, and creed were to be liquidated... (1957, p. 163)*

As people moved from rural communities to urban and atomised lifestyles, they became part of a social world involving many more people, from increasingly diverse backgrounds. With increased travel, greater interaction of people from disparate backgrounds, and the growth of media like pamphleteering and newspapers, a public sphere began to emerge (Habermas, 1992). The burgeoning public sphere marks a further profound shift from life organised around the family and its local community.

Connected with the rise of the public sphere, was the decline of civic humanism. Civic humanism, sometimes known as “Old Whig”, “Commonwealth”, “Country” or classical republicanism, draws on Aristotelian notions of political community and calls upon virtuous citizens to be actively engaged in the running and defence of the commonwealth. In this tradition,<sup>37</sup> the polis is understood as crucial for social integration and the development of character and virtue. Following Aristotle, man (sic) is understood as a political animal (*zōon politikon*), and engagement in a political community of equals was pivotal in realising one’s potential and sense of self worth. Furthermore, such engagement worked to foster commitment and interest in the community, whilst developing civic virtues that militate greed and selfishness. As Pocock (1971; 1972) points out, civic humanism, or more specifically the Country ideology, proved surprisingly resistant in Britain, where it developed for nearly a century.

Nonetheless, with the growth of states, their standing armies, and public credit, and as the expectation that citizens were actively engaged in the running of the commonwealth

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<sup>37</sup> For examples see Arendt, 1958; Fink, 1962; Skinner, 1998; Pettit, 1997; Pocock, 1971; 1975.

flagged, civic republicanism entered decline (Pocock, 1972; Tronto, 1993). Indeed, the backdrop to the decline of civic humanism is a debate, spanning the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, between civic humanism and the modern natural law tradition. The debate centred around the proper role and function of politics with regard to the state and human relationships.

In contrast to civic humanist, republican or Country (Pocock, 1972) approaches to politics, which advocate a participatory politics where the virtue of citizens is nurtured, the modern natural law thinkers argued for a regulatory, legalistic politics founded in laws designed to curtail the potential ravages of the pursuit of private gain. Modern natural law thinkers like Hugo Grotius, “a profoundly anti-Aristotelian thinker,” (Teichgraeber, 1986, p. 24) fundamentally reject the Aristotelian view of man (sic) as *zōon politikon*. They understood men (sic) to be both competitive and social, requiring society to survive. To avoid Hobbes’ war of every man against every man, individuals needed to agree to a common system of law that would allow them to pursue their own ends. According to Teichgraeber:

*In natural law politics, man is a legal or juristic person rather than the citizen-warrior of civil humanist tradition. Moreover, he is a creature with “rights” that must be defended and protected in public law. His primary concern is not the art of ruling so much as the rational pursuit of his private concerns and interests. (1986, p. 21)*

Modern natural law thinking can be understood as emerging in the aftermath of a period of religious wars (Clark, 1966, chapter 6), where the ‘private’ interests of religious communities wreaked havoc and destruction across much of Europe. Grotius himself lived through the Eighty Years War between Spain and his Dutch homeland, and the Thirty Years War between Catholic and Protestant nations. Seen in this context it is not surprising that such thinkers were preoccupied with the task of securing public order and peaceable social interactions beyond such private concerns. In contrast to the scholastic rights theorists who reconceived Aristotle’s notion of rights to include subjective rights,

where individual subjective rights were limited by natural law, Grotius conceived of rights as “entirely self-referential; they defined whatever was appropriate to ... [one] in light of his personal merits or of his property.” (Teichgraeber, 1986, p. 24) For Grotius this meant a good society was one in which “every one should enjoy his own, with the help, and by the united force of the whole community.” (Grotius, cited in Teichgraeber, 1986, p. 24) These ideas had a profound influence upon the Scottish Enlightenment thinkers, and his alternative view of social order, as we shall see below, while taken up in different ways, were resolutely adopted by Hutcheson, Hume, and Adam Smith.

### *Scottish moralists – politics, morality, and the problem of social distance*

The Scottish Enlightenment thinkers, in particular, Hutcheson, Hume, and Smith can be seen as part of the modern natural law tradition in so far as they also conceive the political as primarily performing a regulatory, legalistic role for society, in contrast to those traditions which draw upon Aristotle and the need for individuals to participate in political community which nurtured virtuous citizens. They understood morality’s wellspring as resting in individuals’ sentiments and passions, hence they no longer located virtue as part of an individual’s conscious pursuit of the public good. Virtue came to be seen as the proper organization of private passions.

The eighteenth-century is therefore pivotal in the development of modern notions of politics. As Pocock (1972, p. 129) observes, “For the first time, eighteenth-century men were setting their conceptions of politics in a context of historical change, the transition from the agrarian world of the Middle Ages to the mercantile and specialized world of their own generations.”

Hutcheson can be understood as reflecting the transition between the two worlds Pocock describes above. He recognised the problem of social distance and the resultant need for humans to have a level of attachment and concern for others who were distant – invoking a universal moral sense or benevolence – whilst privileging the role of “the conventional and local as educators and shapers of moral sense.” (Tronto, 1993, p. 43)

Hume on the other hand, while sharing “Hutcheson’s belief in the naturalness of moral sense” (Tronto, 1993, p. 45), did not think relying on such notions of human benevolence was enough to ensure justice in the context of societies of increasing social distance and cosmopolitanism. Hume thought Hutcheson’s notions of moral sentiment and sympathy inadequate in the face of increasing social distance. While sympathy works when people are close, he did not believe people held a general love of mankind:

*In general, it may be affirm’d, that there is no such passion in human minds, as the love of mankind, merely as such, independent of personal qualities, of services, or of relation to ourself. ‘Tis true, there is no human, and indeed no sensible, creature, whose happiness or misery does not, in some measure, affect us, when brought near to us, and represented in lively colours: But this proceeds merely from sympathy, and is no proof of such an universal affection to mankind... (Hume, cited in Tronto, 1993, p. 45)*

Having acknowledged the limitations of sympathy, Hume argued that for justice to be ensured, while it was founded in the natural idea of benevolence, laws and convention were needed to train people to behave well towards one another.

Not surprisingly, given the rate of change during the eighteenth-century and the years that separate Hutcheson, Hume, and Smith, Adam Smith’s account of sympathy further reflects the impact of growing social distance. Unlike Hutcheson’s very local and direct notion of sympathy, or Hume’s more mediated conception, Smith thought of sympathy less as a natural, instinctual reflex and more as an active process of imagining ourselves in the place of the other<sup>38</sup>. Highlighting the influence of modern natural law thinking, Smith argued that humans natural social disposition make us keen to be accepted by others as proper. For Smith, propriety was a motivating force in our empathising with the position of the other and hence invoking proper sympathetic responses. In a departure from Hutcheson and Hume, moral behaviour became grounded in an *active* process. Of course, if sympathy was indeed an *active* response, this posed particular problems.

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<sup>38</sup> In a sociological context we can note how much this view shares with Mead’s (1962) social psychology.

Firstly, we would be more likely to sympathise with those better off, risking the complete neglect of the poor. Secondly, recalling Hume, people would be more likely to sympathise with those close to them, furthering existing divisions in society, class, status, 'race' et cetera. Finally, distance itself would likely warp one's proper sympathetic response. Smith provides the instructive example of us being more concerned with the loss of the tip of one of our little fingers than the death of a million people in China. Smith's response to this raft of problems was to move away from a pure theory of moral sentiments, preferring instead one increasingly tempered by reason and duty (Tronto, 1993, pp. 46 – 47). Over several editions of Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, he arrived at the view that as distance, both physical and social, increased, the basis of morality shifted from our seeking of the more intense face to face approval of others toward self interest; if moral behaviour was in the interest of others, they too would act morally (Tronto, 1993, p 49).

In contrast to Hutcheson, Smith was also sceptical about the ability of a political community to nurture virtue in its citizens. As Pocock (1983) noted, in light of the social changes described above, by the time the likes of Hutcheson, Hume, and Smith considered the role of civic virtue, much of its political and moral gravitas had dissipated. Contrary to traditions like civic humanism, Smith thought the role of the state was not the development of character and virtue, but that the state should be more circumscribed, legalistic and regulatory. In Teichgraeber's words:

*The project of capitalism, as he [Smith] envisioned it, is for self-seeking men to create a prosperous world in which economic activity serves individual needs and desires, not those shaped by religion, nation, government, or privileged social and economic institutions. (1986, p. 178)*

In this vision we can clearly see the legacy of Grotius and the modern natural rights thinkers, along with the scepticism about the ability of political communities to create virtuous citizens in the face of rapidly increasing physical and social distance, and the

dangers associated with religious communities and zealots or ambitious noblemen (Teichgraeber, 1986, p. 3).

The result of this work by the Scottish Moralists was “a de-politicized view of individual morality and a de-moralized view of politics.” (Teichgraeber, 1986, p. 10) The market and commerce were seen as securing social order and integration. It was through commerce and exchange that “man” could meet those needs which his own labour could not provide for, and hence intertwine self-interest and the material and social benefit of general society. As a result, politics becomes increasingly legalistic, regulatory and administrative; politics is no longer the sphere in which humanity’s “deepest practical and moral concerns find resolution or fulfilment.” (Teichgraeber, 1986, p. 10) From a view of politics which saw men (sic) as needing to develop character and virtue, to be good in active and positive ways as well as being law-abiding, we arrive at a position where politics is reduced to the regulation of social life; in Teichgraeber’s (1986, p. 9) words it “has no positive moral value or purpose in a capitalist society.”

While we should understand the conception of politics thinkers like Smith held as an ideal type in the Weberian sense (Weber, 1949), we can nonetheless clearly note the legacy of this conception in contemporary politics. Bearing in mind the contested nature of a term like politics noted above, if we limit our view to the forms of politics which are institutionalised, we can clearly see the dominance of such issues as interest rates, taxes, inflation, employment, ‘technical’ matters of the economy; reflecting *homo economicus* and the Scottish moralists’ narrow conception of politics as being the regulation and administration of social life.

While the authors do not name it, there can be little doubt that the research covered in Chapter One holds the institutions of this narrow regulatory model of politics as its focus, as *real politics*. In stark contrast to the consistently dominant issues of regulatory politics, namely, economic issues like tax, interest rates, and employment, if we look at young people’s political interests, they are focussed on more morally loaded issues; for example,

reconciliation with Australia's Indigenous peoples, supporting a more egalitarian society (Beresford and Phillips, 1997), relationships, or youth suicide (Manning and Ryan, 2004).

### *Changes in the private sphere*

Concurrent with the changes to men's lives in the calculating and self-interested world of commerce, the market and the newly burgeoning public sphere, was a rethinking of the household. As the public world was increasingly understood as a world of strangers, rife with corruption and vanity, the household, and of course, women as its 'natural' custodians, were seen as a counterbalance. Tronto (1993, pp. 54 – 56) argues that as moral life shifted from a foundation of pure sentiment towards increasing mediation by reason, women, and the private sphere, in turn became the home of sentiment, sympathy and benevolence.<sup>39</sup> In Christopher Lasch's phrase the family became a *Haven in a Heartless World* (1977). Ariès (1962), and Berger, Berger, and Kellner (1974) also argue that the family's move toward relationships of intense intimacy, emotionality, and romantic love were a response to an increasingly impersonal, bureaucratized modern state (*gesellschaft*). Indeed Berger et al. comment, "The private sphere has served as a kind of balancing mechanism providing meanings and meaningful activities to compensate for the discontents brought about by the large structures of modern society."<sup>40</sup> (1974, pp. 185 – 186)

Norbert Elias has also described the division between public and private worlds which emerged during this period:

*In other words, with the advance of civilization the lives of human beings are increasingly split between an intimate and a private sphere, between secret and public behavior. And this split is taken so much for granted, becomes so compulsive a habit, that it is hardly perceived in consciousness.* (Elias, [1939] 1978, p. 190)

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<sup>39</sup> See also Mullan (1988) and Dwyer (1987).

<sup>40</sup> In contrast, Silver (1997) has argued that it is precisely the rise of the impersonal structures of *gesellschaft* which provides the conditions for these new non-instrumental relationships of private life, such as the modern notion of friendship.

*Immanuel Kant, John Rawls - morality and the self*

Kant's work, founding morality in universal reason and rules, can be seen as following on from the work of the Scottish moralists and their preoccupation with the problem of social distance and the concomitant fading confidence in the worth of situated political communities (Tronto, 1993, p. 51). Unlike Hutcheson, Hume, and to a lesser extent Smith, Kantian morality does not need proximity or emotional engagement to ensure moral behaviour. As liberalism tries to eschew any particular ends, preferring to allow citizens to *choose* and pursue their *own* ends "it therefore must govern by principals that do not presuppose any particular conception of the good." (Sandel, 1984, p. 82) Kant argued for this, in part, via the transcendental subject, a subject with autonomous will, independent of social and psychological inclinations, nature and "the vagaries of circumstance." (p. 84)

For Kant, humans are creatures capable of transcending their specific and embodied being via the universal capacity for pure reason, and it is this capacity for reason which leads to a rational set of moral rules, beyond experience, particular ends, locality, proximity, emotional engagement and so on. In contrast to Hutcheson, Hume, and Smith, Kant thought behaviour governed by *duty* was of higher moral worth than that which had its beginnings in *inclinations*. The crucial matter for Kant is that we *choose* to act according to duty, independent of such worldly concerns as love or affection (Morris, 2003).

While Kant's theory is able to dispense with the problem of social distance by arguing for the universal capacity of a pure reason which furnishes humans with the ability to will moral duty, irrespective of experience, we are left with a *subject* which must also be prior to and independent/transcendent of experience. In Sandel's words:

*And so the notion of a subject prior to and independent of experience, such as the Kantian ethic requires, appears not only possible but indispensable, a necessary presupposition of the possibility of freedom. (1984, p. 85)*



In a modern rendition, John Rawls (1971) deployed his original position in an attempt to retain the force of Kant's doctrine – the priority of right establishing a society where citizens choose their own values and ends, with a similar liberty for all – while replacing his transcendental idealism with “a reasonable empiricism.” (Rawls, cited in Sandel, 1984, p. 85).

Rawls' original position asks us to assume the position of architect of society, choosing the principals we would govern by if we were to choose them before we knew the particular people we would be in that society – rich or poor, educated or uneducated, lucky or unlucky, able-bodied or disabled, black or white – hence before we knew our aims, interests or *telos*. For Rawls, the principals we would choose in such an imaginary position are the principals of justice, and of course they do not presuppose any particular ends. As Sandel points out however, they do presuppose a particular conception of the person, an unencumbered self, a self outside of history, culture and society, a self with no particularity, purposes or ends. Such a self exists before and beyond experience, its identity is already secured. Hence, such a self precludes constitutive ends and means there is always distance between the attributes I *have* and the person I *am* (also see MacIntyre, 1981, pp. 227 – 237; Nussbaum, 2001, pp. 340 – 342). In Sandel's words:

*No role or commitment could define me so completely that I could not understand myself without it. No project could be so essential that turning away from it would call into question the person I am.* (1984, p. 86)

While Rawls tries to inject Kant's morality with empiricism, to anchor it to a worldly subject, the subject of the original position remains “wholly without character, without moral depth” (Sandel, 1984, p. 90). Rawls' unencumbered self cannot belong to a community which demands more than mere cooperation. A community that engaged the *identity* as well as the interests of a subject is a community beyond that which an

unencumbered self – with its pre-existing identity – can know. For such a community would be *constitutive* of individuals, rather than based merely on their cooperation.<sup>41</sup>

The significance of these critiques lies in their status as dominant and hegemonic moral theories in the Western world. As Tronto (1993, p. 51) observes, “since the late eighteenth century, Kant’s model of what constitutes good moral theory ... has stood almost unchallenged...” And no less an authority on moral theory than Alistair MacIntyre (1966, p. 190) has said, “For perhaps the majority of later philosophical writers, including many who are self-consciously anti-Kantian, ethics is defined as a subject in Kantian terms.” Thus, the almost unrivalled model of moral behaviour, in either its Kantian Enlightenment rendition drawing upon a transcendental subject or Rawls’ modern variant which rests upon the original position, leave us with a model of the self which is disinterested, disengaged, discrete, prior to and independent of experience – unworldly. The notion of the self as discrete and wholly unworldly will be discussed further in the second section of the thesis, and shown to contrast sharply with the *relational* and *interconnected* model of self invoked by many of the participants of this research.

### *Summary*

This section has tried to show the historical origins of the narrow liberal notion of politics and its corresponding conception of morality. We saw how this circumscribed politics contrasted with notions of situated political community, and that these modern notions of politics arose in specific historical conditions characterised by increasing social distance, commerce, industrialisation, urbanisation, and atomisation. It was argued that through the work of the Scottish Enlightenment thinkers, morality and politics became divorced, rendering politics sharply circumscribed from its previous manifestations in political communities that drew upon an Aristotelian tradition. Politics came to be seen as primarily legalistic and concerned with the regulation and administration of social life. Accordingly, morality/ethics became a feature of private life; character development was to take place in the family, rather than in public through politics. Kant overcame the

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<sup>41</sup> In this notion of the self as a discrete identity, with its own independent interests and ends, capable of cooperation to further those ends, we can clearly see its pedigree in the work of the Scottish moralists.

Scottish preoccupation with social distance via universalistic pure reason, but in turn created a most unworldly subject. In the twentieth century, Rawls attempted to salvage Kant's universal morality and anchor his transcendental subject with a reasonable empiricism, yet as the discussion of Sandel showed, even in Rawls' modern rendition an unworldly, unencumbered, discrete self is unavoidable. Finally, it was argued that both the narrow view of politics as regulation and morality/ethics as private and separate from politics are hegemonic in contemporary Western societies.

This historical excursion shows, firstly, through the discussion of civic humanism and the Country Ideology, that the dominant contemporary understanding of politics and its role in social life is not the only way of doing politics. Secondly, it should be clear that the regulatory and legalistic model of politics we live with today, that which was bequeathed to the West by the Scottish Enlightenment, developed under and in response to specific historical and social conditions. In particular, the Scots were preoccupied with the problem of maintaining justice in the face of increasing social distance in modernising societies. Contemporary institutionalised politics clearly has its lineage in the regulatory, administrative, depoliticised morality and demoralised politics developed by the likes of Hutcheson, Hume, Smith, and Kant. The consequence of this lineage, and indeed its hegemonic status, can be clearly seen in the political research discussed in Chapter One. If young people are not interested in dominant, mainstream politics and its institutions, then they are *ipso facto* apathetic and or disengaged. If young people are not interested in the dominant issues of taxation, inflation, employment, or interest rates, then they are deemed to be lacking interest in *politics*. Political practices undertaken by young people which blend public and private are typically missed by research operating with a notion of politics which maintains a decisive split between public and private spheres. Precisely because the Scottish model of an administrative, regulatory, demoralised politics is hegemonic, unreflexive deployment of politics in research effectively squeezes out any form of 'politics' which falls beyond its bounds. Such contemporary researchers are reifying the assumptions of a model of politics developed some two hundred and fifty years ago. This is not necessarily a problem, save for the tremendous social change which has taken place since this model was developed.

## Conclusion

This chapter has undertaken the problematisation of dominant, hegemonic notions of politics. It began by looking at the work of Harris and Bulbeck and the argument that part of what bolsters the discourse of apathetic and disengaged youth is the application of *particular* conceptions of politics, in Bulbeck's case a politics forged in the 1970s, in research of young people and politics. The work of Harris and Bhavnani highlighted the critical difference between cynicism and apathy, where cynicism requires a level of engagement and critique. Harris' work also drew attention to the need for research of young people and politics to understand young people as more than data, as creative, reflective, socio-political actors. Beyond this, Vromen's work showed us that when a broader notion of politics/participation is used in quantitative research, young people are indeed far from the stereotype of 'Gen X slackers'.

This chapter has opened up the political, finding it to be a product of history, shaped by social, cultural, and technological forces. The narrow, regulatory model of liberal politics, first pioneered during the Scottish Enlightenment, and which over time has become the dominant hegemonic model for politics in Western societies, is not the only way politics can be done. As discussed above, in the past, politics was a sphere for character development, friendship and love, and pursuing collective goods. As will be discussed in the following chapter, in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, politics can play a central role in one's lifestyle and identity (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1991; Lichterman, 1996; Perkins and Craig, 2006; Simons, 1995).

Having outlined the legacy of the Scottish moralists in their views of politics as mere regulation of a society constituted by autonomous and self-interested beings – *homo economicus* – it is now possible to return to the theme of problematising politics. I shall undertake this problematisation in the next chapter by, firstly, discussing recent social theory, which shares with the discourse of youth apathy a concern for politics, public debate and democracy and secondly, examining contemporary theory and research, which challenges the assumptions of the hegemonic model of narrow politics, separate morality, and divided public/private spheres.

# Chapter 4

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## Politics and Late Modernity

### Introduction

This thesis is a qualitative examination of the discourse which posits young people as apathetic and disengaged from politics. Thus far, Chapter One canvassed recent Australian research which consistently found young people to lack involvement, knowledge, and interest in politics. Chapters Two and Three discussed the two key assumptions the discourse of apathetic youth relies on, namely a linear understanding of youth, where youth has its end in adulthood, and the reliance of the discourse on a narrow, administrative notion of politics which has its origins in classical liberalism. This chapter will build on the discussion of the last by further opening up the meaning of the political. It begins with a discussion of contemporary social theory, and the overlapping preoccupations of this body of literature and the discourse of apathetic and disengaged youth. As we have seen in previous chapters, various sections of society have contributed to the discourse of apathetic youth – the government, the media, and social researchers. At a more general level, a key preoccupation of contemporary social theory has been the apparent decline in social/political involvement and the public sphere, and the atomising and individualising affect of modernity. The second half of this chapter will counter this vision of post/late modernity with a discussion of alternative theoretical approaches, and results from empirical studies of contemporary politics and activism.

## **The Retreat of Politics After Modernity**

As noted in previous chapters, numerous sections of society – the government, the media, and social researchers – have contributed to the discourse of apathetic and disengaged youth. While this discourse has not featured heavily in sociological debates, a key dimension of recent social theory has been preoccupied with the apparent decline in social/political involvement and the public sphere, and the atomising and individualising affect of modernity. In different ways, this literature raises very similar concerns about the future of democracy and public debate to those raised by proponents of the youth as apathetic discourse. While these authors tend to couch their arguments about the decline of social/political engagement and the public sphere, and social atomisation, within the recent past, at their best they also maintain a longer historical view seeing the antecedents of these changes in the advent of modernity and the Industrial and French Revolutions.

It is argued that many of the changes that have led to contemporary society being defined by individualism – weak social bonds, social networks rather than communities with strong and enduring social bonds – have their antecedence in the changes occurring around the time of the industrial revolution. Accompanying the great industrial and political changes of this period were radical changes to the organization of social life. As discussed in the previous chapter, it was during this time that the demarcation between the ‘private’ realm of ‘personal life’ and the public realm of *gesellschaft* (Tönnies, 1957) began to emerge. There was mass migration from rural areas to cities, production shifted from the home to factories, and there was a shift from village community life – typically defined by strong group identity and social relations – and shared values and norms, toward the disembedding of social relations, weak social ties, the decline of sociability, reduced family size, and the fracturing of shared values and communal identities (Polanyi, 1957). Commenting on the decline of sociability and the increasing isolation of the modern family, Ariès states,

*It is not individualism which has triumphed, but the family. But this family has advanced in proportion as sociability has retreated. It is as if the modern family had sought to take the place of the old social relationships (as these gradually*

*defaulted) in order to preserve mankind [sic] from an unbearable moral solitude.*  
(1962, p. 406)

Berger et al. (1974) view the family and the private sphere in a similar way, as providing meaning against an abstract, instrumental public sphere. Their critique of modernity goes further however, suggesting that mobility and the pluralisation of social life-worlds leads to “what might be called a metaphysical loss of “home””(p. 82). While people construct and reconstruct “refuges that they experience as “home””, their attempts are often unsuccessful, because “over and over again, the cold winds of “homelessness” threaten these fragile constructions” (p. 188). Hence, modernisation has liberated individuals “from the narrow controls of family, clan, tribe or small community” and provided moderns with “previously unheard-of options and avenues of mobility”<sup>42</sup> (p. 195), but ‘homelessness’ is the price of this individuation. In this context, Bammer (1992, !!!check page No.s) argues that the ‘home’ becomes a performance; home “is neither here nor there ... rather, itself a hybrid, it is both here and there – an amalgam, a pastiche, a performance”.

Other writers have also discussed the themes of mobility and the resultant ‘homelessness’ Berger et al. speak of. Richard Sennett highlights modernity’s demand for change in the work-place when he says, “failure to move is taken as a sign of failure, stability seeming almost a living death. ... To stay put is to be left out” (1998, p. 87). Gauchet sees contemporary individualism as reflecting the desire for change and new beginnings.

*More recently, we have abruptly shifted towards an individualism of **disconnection** or **disengagement**, where the demand for authenticity becomes incompatible with the attachment to a collectivity. In the ultracontemporary world, you can only be yourself if you keep yourself within yourself. The characteristic gesture of the contemporary individual is not self-affirmation through involvement (as it was in*

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<sup>42</sup> Novelist Milan Kundera has described this dimension of modernity as *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984).

*an earlier phase); it is rather the new beginning. ... To affirm oneself is to withdraw.*<sup>43</sup> (2000, p. 32, emphasis in original)

As Lash and Urry (1994, p. 281) argue, with the compression of time and space, made especially possible by modern communications technology, people are more interconnected, but “there are relatively few formal relationships between individuals ... [and] there is an undeveloped sense of solidarity, especially that fostered vis-à-vis others”. Contemporary Western society is characterised by “few common standards ... where strong binding collectives have declined and been replaced by communities of choice, and where informal social sanctions have weakened” (Hirst and Thomson, 1996, p. 193). All this suggests the West’s move toward *The Network Society* (Castells, 2004), where the questions shift from ‘Who are you?’ ‘Which are your values and engagements?’ To: ‘To whom are you related?’ ‘With whom are you in contact?’ ‘Whom will you be able to call in an emergency?’ (Stichweh, 2002)

From this perspective, Zygmunt Bauman has become a leading prophet for a postmodernity (Smith, 1999) characterised by a loss of community and strong social bonds, increasing privatisation, a declining public sphere and a dismantled welfare state, consumer culture, and perpetual change. In a recent book, *Liquid Modernity* (2000), Bauman uses the model of a caravan park as an analogy for contemporary society. People come and go in their caravans with their own itineraries, with little interest in the workings of the site. They ask for basic amenities and to be left alone. If things do not meet their expectations they may complain, things may be fixed, but people do not question or try to renegotiate the managerial philosophy of the site, let alone organize to take over and run the site themselves! (pp. 23 – 24)

In *Modernity and Ambivalence* (1991), Bauman uses the German Jew as a vehicle for his argument that order and ambivalence are twin born. For Bauman, modernity is defined by its obsessive quest for order and control. But given the world does not exist to reflect the

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<sup>43</sup> Wilkinson and Mulgan’s (1995) research on young people empirically supports Gauchet’s assertions, with their finding that many young people “take pride in being out of the system” (p. 92)



theories and desires of moderns (see also Connolly, 1991), the very quest itself unintentionally produces disorder and ambivalence. Bauman argues that the German Jew was the ideal person to corrupt and unsettle established notions of ‘Germanness’ and the binary of German and other. Gradually, in an attempt to assimilate, urban, educated Jews further differentiated themselves from eastern European Jews through increasing secularisation. They also became strong patriots to show their commitment to Germany and its people. Such changes, however, only made the Jew more ambivalent and slimy; he/she seeped between the notions of Jew and German. The Jew’s attempts at assimilation only further threatened their position within German society as it overtly destabilised the identity and meaning of ‘Germanness’. In the interests of order, purity, and control the Jew had to be eradicated.

Having firmly established the close connection between modernity and ambivalence, Bauman tries to show that the contemporary epoch is about living *with* ambivalence and contingency. The project of total eradication of ambivalence has largely been abandoned. In Bauman’s words, the result for the individual is that she has become a stranger:

*In terms of his [sic] biography, the contemporary individual passes a long string of widely divergent (uncoordinated at best, contradictory at worst) social worlds. At any single moment of his life, the individual inhabits simultaneously several such divergent worlds. The result is that he is ‘uprooted’ from each and not ‘at home’ in any. One may say that he is the universal stranger. (1991, p. 95)*

For Bauman, a key component of contemporary social life is the privatisation of human problems and our inability to connect up private troubles and form public issues (Mills, 1958). Bauman has devoted at least one book – *In Search of Politics* (1999) – to lamenting the colonisation of the public sphere by the private, and the very “possibility of politics” (Wagner, 1994) in an era of such privatisation and social atomisation. A particular form of individualism militates against the joining of individuals, their troubles and interests:

*Private fears seldom meet other private fears, and when they do they do not easily recognize each other. That difficulty to concur and converge, to combine and be combined, to join and be joined, has come to be called individual freedom. (1999, p. 63)*

As a result of our weak social bonds, pluralised life-worlds, and network society, individuals are left only with the sharing of intimacies as a basis for community building:

*This building technique can only spawn ‘communities’ as fragile and short-lived as scattered and wandering emotions, shifting erratically from one target to another and drifting in the forever inconclusive search for a secure haven: communities of shared worries, shared anxieties or shared hatreds – but in each case ‘peg’ communities, a momentary gathering around a nail on which many solitary individuals hang their solitary individual fears. (2000, p. 37)*

As will be explored in more detail below, the chances of connecting and organizing within the public sphere and the realm of politics are no better, as it is increasingly colonised by the private. Bauman says that rather than trade unions or political parties, a more likely experience of collective action within *Liquid Modernity* (2000) is represented by that which occurs within an angry mob protesting paedophiles (1999, p. 10).

For Bauman, postmodernity has meant that strangerhood “is no longer a temporary condition to be overcome, but a way of life” (Harman, 1988, p. 44). A way of life burdened with contingency, where the motto of ‘until further notice’ characterises many facets of social life – friendships, intimate relationships, work-life and employment. Where individuals cannot see how their troubles might be shared with others. A privatised world in which the public sphere is dominated by “the display of private affairs and public confessions of private sentiments (the more intimate the better)” (Bauman, 2000, p. 37). A life in which consumer goods and the market are used to quell the seething emptiness of living in a world where our troubles are truly our own, where we must make our own identity surrounded by strangers, and never feel ‘at home’.

But this is only *one way* of interpreting modernity, an interpretation that seems to have all the traffic headed in the same direction. Drawing on Berman's (1983) insistence upon capturing the dynamism of modernity, and the tradition which runs from Nietzsche through Foucault that views the world as always being "richer than the systems through which we comprehend and organize it" (Connolly, 1991, p. 33), might we ask if anything else is going on? Are there counter narratives to: the decline of politics and the public sphere; to those that understand postmodernity as *only* corroding meaningful, enduring connections, relationships, and commitments; to those that foreclose the possibility of politics and a public sphere?

### **Problematising Politics - Theoretical Perspectives**

Along with the empirical studies re-conceptualising politics to be discussed below, a number of social theories have emerged in the last quarter century to examine how social life is being reconstituted by contemporary social forces. Mimi Sheller and John Urry (2003), for example, argue that the public/private divide is now a relic, better abandoned in favour of a more fluid conception, one that recognises the mobile networks of contemporary social relations. Against a great swathe of twentieth century social theory that tried to maintain, and later rescue, static, regional, and fixed notions of a public/private divide, Sheller and Urry see the twenty-first century as bringing irreparable transformations to our understanding of public and private. They see no clear separation between the two, noting that, "nothing much of contemporary social life remains on one side or the other of the divide." (2003, p. 122) Information, communications, screens, and even cars are understood by the authors as material worlds which transform orthodox notions of the public/private divide creating hybrids of private and public life/space.

The information age, with its explosion in new communications technology, means that 'public information' can be accessed in 'private spaces'; ipso facto "private spaces and private information are now increasingly susceptible to public eavesdropping or tracking, whether by governmental agencies, marketing researchers or computer hackers", political parties or other citizens (2003, p. 116). With the growth in this kind of technology, information about others is increasingly being collected, stored and sometimes sold,

“without those people knowing in general about the information flow or about specific details.” (2003, p. 116) Examples include databases used to assess creditworthiness, targeting consumers using consumer profiles based on purchasing patterns, demographics and other data, profiles built up by political parties, closed circuit television (CCTV), surveillance cameras, satellites and so on (see, Henderson, 2006; Keenan, 2005). Hence, increasingly we exist beyond our private bodies. We can do things (like electronic banking) and communicate without being in a particular place.<sup>44</sup> In Sheller and Urry’s words:

*The information revolution has implanted zones of publicity into the once-private interior spaces of the self and the home.* (2003, p. 117)<sup>45</sup>

Sheller and Urry also argue that the car, often criticised for privatising or colonising public space by social theorists like Habermas (1992) or Reclaim The Streets (RTS) activists, actually undermines a public/private divide by being at times both public and private. They note that “automobility” itself constitutes a civil society of “hybridised ‘car drivers’”, encapsulated in the private sphere of their cars, and excluding those without cars (2003, p.115). The ‘auto-mobile’ private citizen of course relies upon the sequestering of public space for the purpose of public roads. This “rolling private-in-public space”, holds the potential to reproduce zones of domesticity “on the road through social relations such as the ‘back-seat driver’ or the common dependence on a partner for navigation and map reading.” (2003, p. 115) While cars do create a private realm within a public space, cocooning private citizens from those outside, their culture and ways of life, or from experiencing in any depth the sights, sounds or smells of particular localities, some of the technologies within the car can allow its user to engage with publics. For example, a car radio may provide news of the ‘public sphere’, one’s government for

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<sup>44</sup> With the increasing digitisation of media the temporal dimension is also affected, being able to watch or listen to media at a time one chooses rather than where they fit in the programming schedule. Some digital set-top boxes can even extract advertisements from programs, allowing advertisement-free viewing. Not surprisingly this technology has faced considerable opposition, particularly from the entertainment industry (see Lane, 2005).

<sup>45</sup> The Internet, and specifically hugely popular sites like Myspace, provide further examples of a blurring of any public/private divide. Myspace is used by some 50 million people (Aedy, 2006) as a social networking tool, but it is of course typically accessed from a ‘private’ place, like one’s home.

instance; a Digital Video Disc (DVD) player allows one to view any number of media products from those designed for sheer entertainment to informative documentaries; mobile phones connect us to the outside world and even the car itself may be used to propagate issues relevant to the 'public sphere(s)' through bumper stickers and sloganeering. One's very choice of car could be interpreted as political, if, for example, one used a car which ran on renewable energy or bio-diesel, or even diesel or natural gas rather than petrol, as it uses less fossil fuel and burns cleaner than conventional petrol engines. The choice of a small car could also be a consciously political decision, again pulling the very car itself into the 'public sphere(s)'. Equally, the presence of such cars on the road have the potential to further discussion about: their use, merits and cons, sustainable/renewable energy, environmentalism and so on. Thus automobiles cannot clearly be demarcated as dwelling only within the private sphere.

If Sheller and Urry are correct in their analysis of contemporary social life and the new mobile and hybrid forms of public and private, then we are witnessing more than privatisation, erosion of the public sphere or the 'colonization of the life-world', we are also witnessing mobile, fluid manifestations of hybrid public-private worlds. Following Marshall Berman (1983), this is the other side of the story, necessary for any thoroughgoing critique of modernity. Proponents of the privatisation/colonization thesis see the modern world as a place where the public sphere is shrinking (Bauman, 1999; Kohn, 2004), where public space has been carved up for cars (Habermas, 1992), where corporations have usurped the role of public institutions and commercialised public space (Klein, 2000a), where politics itself has become a forum for private troubles, disclosure and confession:

*The 'public' is colonized by the 'private'; 'public interest' is reduced to curiosity about the private lives of public figures, and the art of public life is narrowed to the display of private affairs and public confessions of private sentiments (the more intimate the better). 'Public issues' which resist such reduction become all but incomprehensible. (Bauman, 2000, p. 37)*

*The most seminal of privatizations was that of human problems and of the responsibility for their resolution... In the postmodern society of consumers, failure rebounds in guilt and shame, not in political protest. (Bauman, 1991, p. 261)*

But modernity is dynamic and complex, it is imperative that we recognise change when it happens and investigate its implications. Public space has no doubt changed since Henry Ford began mass production of the automobile. The cult of celebrity and the private lives of public figures certainly have currency, and our shift towards consumer culture has also wrought change on public space and the public sphere, but as we saw above, new communications technology has also transformed our relationship with public and private, making them more fluid, mobile, and hybrid. As Sheller and Urry note, activist groups have been quick and effective at operationalising the fundamental insight that in a globalised world, “what people do in their ‘private’ lives matters at a global ‘public’ level” (p. 121):<sup>46</sup>

*... social movement activists have recognized the political significance of a private that is at once public, a local that is at once global, a small act that has large implications across the globe... (2003, p. 120)*

The importance of all this rests on how these changes in the materialisation of the public and private impact on democracy and citizenship. Privatisation of the public sphere (if it is still reasonable to describe it as such), be it by cars, commercial interests and consumerism, or the cult of celebrity that leads to the private lives of public figures dominating public forums *does* challenge established forms of citizenship and the space available for dialogue and deliberation about important social and political issues. At the same time, however, new opportunities for (political) communication and action are opening up. As Sheller and Urry argue, despite the heroic efforts of much twentieth century theory to rescue the public/private divide, “the patient has died on the operating table.” As a result, the important sites for democratic citizenship at this point in the

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<sup>46</sup> The Slow Food Movement can be understood as another example of modern social practice where public and private, politics and private life become intertwined. Indeed it has been described as the ‘eco-gastronomic’ movement (Parkins and Craig, 2006).

twenty-first century are precisely those sites which “are both and neither, public and private.” (2003, p. 122)

## **Problematising Politics - Empirical Approaches**

In this section I would like to discuss some of the research of activism, politics, and citizenry activity which “are both and neither, public and private.” In his highly acclaimed fictional account of life during the second half of the twentieth century in the United States, author Don DeLillo captures a key element of a new kind of politics.

*Even the lowest household trash is closely observed. People look at their garbage differently now, seeing every bottle and crushed carton in a planetary context.*  
(DeLillo, 1997, p. 88)

DeLillo is referring to a seismic shift, suggesting that environmental concerns about waste and recycling had, by the late twentieth century, permeated people’s psyche, forcing them to rethink their relationship with waste and the environment.<sup>47</sup> Returning to academic literature, we can also find examples of people engaging in politics in what have typically been defined as individual private undertakings occurring in the private sphere. Indeed, Paul Lichterman’s (1996) research found that *personalism*, an interest in self-fulfilment, actually supports rather than sabotages some people’s political commitment.

Wielding an argument complementary to that spearheaded above by Bauman, some critics claim that the individualism emerging during the twentieth century was excessively self-centred, even narcissistic, and as such undermined individuals commitment to the common good. With community being replaced by *The Culture of Narcissism* (Lasch, 1979), or Philip Rieff’s “Psychological Man”, these authors see the

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<sup>47</sup> A further example of this line of thinking can be seen in claims to ‘get in touch with the carbon in your life’, in regard to individual contributions to global carbon levels (Hogarth, 2006, see also Ha, 2006). This is a call for individuals to think about their energy use, how is the energy they use produced – through coal burning electricity stations or renewable energies? Also, how might one reduce the amount of carbon one is contributing – using low energy lights, car-pooling, using public transport, walking and bicycling instead of taking the fossil fuel burning car, eating food produced locally and so on.

death of an older cultural and moral order based on obligation and duty to the common good. Following this argument, if people are now more interested in self-fulfilment and self expression, if moral obligation becomes just another personal experience one could take or leave, then community life, which they say is characterised by obligation to the community and upholding traditions which transcend the individual and bind the community, will necessarily languish. From this perspective community involvement and political commitment seem to demand self-discipline and sacrifice.<sup>48</sup> Lichterman argues that these communitarian critiques of personalism amount to a seesaw argument about personal delight versus community obligation. Personal delight and community obligation are polarised with one benefiting at the other's expense. Hence, for communitarians like Etzioni (1993), or proponents of social capital like Putnam (2000) or Cox (1995), the ideal is balance, an equilibrium of personal indulgence with service to one's community.

Lichterman claims this is a false dichotomy, a view of individual and community which blinds us to the ways in which personalism or self-fulfilment may foster an individual commitment to community and political causes. For Lichterman, personalised politics is part of a repertoire of collective political action, "a repertoire that only some of the "new" identity-focussed activists enact" (1996, p 209). Along side these new forms of political repertoire which understand life as a political project, older community interest and obligation-focussed repertoires continue to operate, but "for activist groups whose members do not publicly share many cultural standards, personalism has provided a common ground for a politics of the common good. Personalism suits their position as public-spirited individuals navigating a sea of small culturally radical groups, community organizing efforts and "alternative" service organizations..." (Lichterman, 1996, p. 218).

Earlier social movement theory described the increasing importance of the cultural and symbolic resistance – even if temporary – that activists were communicating through

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<sup>48</sup> Recalling the quote attributed to Oscar Wilde that "the problem with socialism is that it takes too many evenings."



their very being, as “new media”; as embodiment of an alternative; as highlighting an immanent problem:

*Actors in conflicts are increasingly **temporary**, and their function is to **reveal the stakes**, to announce to society that a fundamental problem exists in a given area. They have a growing symbolic function; one can probably speak of a **prophetic function**. They are a kind of **new media**. They do not fight merely for material goals, or to increase their participation in the system. They fight for symbolic and cultural stakes, for a different meaning and orientation of social action. They try to change people’s lives, they believe that you can change your life today while fighting for more general changes in society. (Melucci, 1985, p. 797, emphasis in original)*

This passage from Melucci not only captures some of the key dimensions of personalised politics: viewing life as a political project; the connection between one’s life and broader social change and the inherent blurring of public and private; and the importance of individual action, it also argues for the importance of this kind of activism despite its transience. Lichterman’s research builds on this depiction of personalised politics with his finding that such activists can in fact be very durable. Despite their identity focus, perhaps, indeed, because of it, numerous activists in his study defined their political commitments and “goals in terms of a long haul” (1996, p. 215).

Lichterman’s research stands in stark contrast to Bauman’s vision of our social/political predicament. Lichterman’s research shows us that despite various privatisations, the alleged colonisation of the public sphere, the erosion of strong social bonds and community, individuals can and do form commitments and collectives for social/political change in the name of the common good – commitments which as we have just noted can be enduring, contra Bauman’s characterisation of social life as “Liquid Modernity”, where the motto of ‘until further notice’ reins supreme. For Lichterman, “personalised politics is not then a narcissistic search for a politics that is immediately pleasing to

individuals (1996, p. 212) ... It [does] not mean sounding off individually at will for the sake of ego" (1999, p. 118).

A range of other studies have also explored the ways in which activists and new social movements challenge the boundaries of institutional politics (Offe, 1985). The following are all examples of what Beck (1992) has described as 'sub-politics'.

Political consumerism, the practice of imparting political significance to the purchases or boycotts one makes, is a prime example of an often individual, 'private' practice being used to further political ends. In Western industrialised societies where people are increasingly defined by what they consume, rather than what they produce, where consumerism has become an inescapable dimension of everyday life (see Bauman, 1998; Desmond, 2003; Langer, 1996); what one chooses to consume and not to consume can be a potent tool in leading a politically/ethically engaged life. Political consumerism is a typical example of what Anthony Giddens (1991) has called lifestyle politics, wherein the ordinary daily decisions of individuals take on political meaning.

Political consumers choose particular products or producers because they want to affect some kind of change to market or institutional practices. Issues of justice, fairness, worker conditions and business and government practices are also considerations for political consumers. What is significant about this practice is that those involved understand their consumer choices as located within broader social, economic, political and moral/ethical contexts, and therefore as having the potential to shape these wider spheres. This understanding has been described as the politics behind products (Micheletti, 2003, cited in Stolle, Hooghe and Micheletti, 2005). When political consumers seek out the politics behind products, or when they tell others to boycott or 'buycott' particular products or companies they are also invoking a powerful sociological tool – C. Wright Mills' sociological imagination (1959). For they are highlighting the interplay between one's private life and practices and the broader world. Young makes this point when discussing the anti-sweatshop movement:

*The discourse of the anti-sweatshop movement, as I hear it, draws attention to the complex structural processes that do connect persons and institutions in very different social and geographic positions. ... We are all connected to them [sweatshop workers]; we wear clothes they make; we sell them in our stores. So the movement has done much to defetishize commodities, revealing market structures as complex human creations. (2003, p. 40)*

Despite increasing claims that political consumerism is on the rise, it was not until very recently that it was systematically investigated using survey research (Stolle, et al., 2005). It seems reasonable to suggest that political consumerism has been ignored by political science until now because, as discussed in the previous, the recalcitrance of the public-political/private-non-political divide which dominates the discipline and mainstream understandings of what constitutes ‘politics’. Consumer choices, according to the hegemonic public-political/private-non-political divide, firmly take place within the private sphere, rendering them unpolitical, more connected with price and marketing than considerations of worker conditions or a company’s environmental record.

As we shall see when we discuss the findings of the present study, practices like political consumerism weaves politics into the fabric of daily life.<sup>49</sup> When politics is no longer a discrete sphere but part of one’s lifestyle, a raft of routine daily decisions become loaded with political meaning. For example, in the present study, being vegetarian was a political act for some of the participants, as was drinking fair trade coffee or the length of one’s shower. Micheletti and Stolle (2005, p. 5) make this point when they say that for young people “politics is utterly enmeshed with their daily life choices about how they dress, what they eat, what they buy, and which music they listen to in their free time.”

In his analysis of ‘Do it Yourself’ (DiY) culture, Peter Gartside (1998) discusses another new way of practicing politics. Gartside sees DiY culture as enmeshed in the

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<sup>49</sup> Former Federal Opposition Leader Mark Latham provided a spectacular account of the interplay of private and public-political life in 2005 with the publication of *The Latham Diaries*. The diaries provide an insight into his parliamentary career, and by the end the reader is left with little doubt about the significance he accords the private life of public figures: “The lesson for those who write about political events is this: never underestimate the impact of private factors and emotions on public figures.” (Latham, 2005, p. 259)

detraditionalised, individualised, and hence post-collective, societies of the developed West. He argues that DiY culture can offer novel ways of creating political space, but laments the decline of collectivism and a robust public sphere, which has rendered politics a contingent and temporary practice. Notwithstanding these challenges, his description of a Reclaim the Streets (RTS) initiative highlights a new form of political practice:

*When Reclaim the Streets – which, for an afternoon, was a ‘campaign group’ of thousands of people – took over the M41 in west London (in a breathtaking feat of organization) it/they/we created space in which it seemed that anything could happen. This wasn’t a ‘festival’ or a ‘rave’ in the organised, policed and commodified sense – although the sound systems provided an optional focus for the event – nor was it an orthodox ‘protest march’. There was no platform, no speeches, no leaders, no formalised statement of demands. The RTS action created something like a ‘Temporary Autonomous Zone’, a window onto creative possibility. RTS’s anonymous pamphleteers have made connections (in an almost ‘theoretical’ register) beyond the simple anti-‘car culture’ issue – ‘The streets are as full of capitalism as of cars and the pollution of capitalism is much more insidious’ – while also insisting on the political nature of the carnival, and the importance of a pluralist, open society. (1998, p. 69)*

Anita Harris’ work on young women’s production of Zines (1999; 2001; 2003) is another example of young people creating new public/political spaces. In Harris’ studies, ‘Zines’ – print newsletters/magazines or websites – offer young women space “to discuss and organise among themselves, and in particular to wrestle with and parody contemporary images of girlhood.” (2003, p. 39) Using commercial techniques to subvert the meaning of a product or an advertising campaign, often called ‘adbusting’ or more generally ‘culture jamming’, is another example of political practice in consumer culture (Harris, 2004a) – confounding commercial space and creating the potential for political space/forum.

Following on from these examples of political practice which can undermine the notion of a discrete public-political/private-non-political divide is the work of Culley and Angelique (2003) who found that ‘private’ concerns can play a key role in a person’s political activism. Their study of women who were long-term anti-nuclear activists found that motherhood played a key role in their involvement, and proved an impetus for learning about nuclear technology. Moreover, some of the activists reconceptualized the meaning of mother from the care of one’s offspring to one who cares for the well-being of the entire community. Echoing former Opposition Leader, Mark Latham’s comments about the affect of private emotions and factors on public figures (2005), all the women in this study focussed on the health issues associated with the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant as a critical factor in prompting their activism. In Culley and Angelique’s words:

*These specific daily events, like mothers’ recognition that something is wrong, are rooted in experiences at home, with children, or with neighbors and set events into motion that ultimately led to personal transformations. Women’s political participation grew out of their personal, everyday experiences.* (2003, p. 456)

Herd and Harrington Meyer’s (2002) analysis of care work and civic engagement further contributes to this critique of a rigid public-political/private-non-political divide. They argue that care work can act as a catalyst for civic and political engagement. Much like we saw in Culley and Angelique’s work, women activists in the toxic waste movement repeatedly cite their responsibility for their family’s wellbeing as kick-starting their involvement (Herda-Rapp, 2000). Further, they argue that care work, “performed mostly by women, has long provided the necessary support for other family members to maximise their own civic engagement.” (2002, p. 672) In fact, Herd and Harrington Meyer argue that care work meets all the standards of other civic activities – generally being voluntary and altruistic, and cultivating social trust and reciprocity – and hence should actually be called civic engagement.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Importantly, they note that unlike political theory, contemporary civic engagement literature does not exclude the family from civil society. Hence, excluding family care work from civic engagement is not the

### *Summary*

This discussion of theoretical and empirical approaches has furthered the process, beginning in Chapter Three, of opening up the political. While some sociological theory has mounted an argument complimentary to the discourse of apathetic youth – an argument about privatisation, colonisation of the public sphere, the atomising affect of modernity – voicing serious concerns for the future of politics, democracy, and public debate, various theoretical and empirical studies have told different stories about contemporary society. These approaches challenge the public/private divide maintained by liberalism and much social theory, instead seeing new political spaces and opportunities between public and private, illuminating the connections between public and private spheres. Claus Offe (1985, p. 826) summarises this space created by new social movements.

*The new movements politicize themes which cannot easily be “coded” with the binary code of the universe of social action that underlies liberal political theory. That is to say, where liberal theory assumes that all action can be categorized as either “private” or “public” (and, in the latter case, rightfully “political”), the new movements locate themselves in a third, intermediary category. They claim a type of issue for themselves, one that is neither “private” (in the sense of being of no legitimate concern to others) nor “public (in the sense of being recognized as the legitimate object of official political institutions and actors), but which consists in collectively “relevant” results and side effects of either private or institutional-political actors for which these actors, however, cannot be held responsible or made responsive by available legal or institutional means. The space of action of the new social movements is a space of **noninstitutional politics** which is not provided for in the doctrines and practices of liberal democracy and the welfare state. (emphasis in original)*

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result “of a consistent theoretical argument that families are private.” (Herd and Harrington Meyer, 2002, p. 676) The authors argue that civic engagement literature comes from a “tradition that is largely gender blind and consequently ignores care work.” (p. 665)

Beyond the blurring of public and private and the new spaces for “noninstitutional politics” this creates, the above examples suggest that while individualism and individualisation may pose acute challenges for older forms of institutionalised politics and solidarity, new opportunities for politics have opened up which transcend the older institutions and their jurisdictions. And most significantly, this literature shows us the ways in which individuals can be politically efficacious, making their lives political projects.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has explored theoretical and empirical examples which fundamentally undermine classical liberalism’s public-political/private-non-political divide. While the social forces of individualism, social atomisation, and the colonisation of the public sphere are no doubt powerful, this chapter has cited important counter trends; arguing that individualism, an interest in self-expression and fulfilment, can be an important means of sustaining long-term political commitments. New social movements and the new mobile, hybrid, public and private spaces opened up by technology offer new spaces and means for undertaking political action. As Sheller and Urry argue, the destabilisation of the public/private divide means that few aspects of social life now remain on one side or the other of the divide. As will be discussed further in coming chapters, this feature of modern life was made very clear during the present study – even when they wanted to, maintaining a public-political/private-non-political divide was virtually impossible for the participants involved in this study.

The chapters that follow will show that for many of the participants of this study the narrow, hegemonic, regulatory model of politics is not the politics they believe in and practice everyday. They challenge its separation of morality/ethics and politics, public and private, and its notion of the self as discrete, atomised, and motivated by self-interest. Before turning to a discussion of the findings of the current research, Chapter Five will discuss the methodological approach and issues of this project.

# Chapter 5

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## Methodology

### Introduction

A number of sections of society, including the media, government, and social research, frequently characterise young people as apathetic and disengaged from politics. This project is a qualitative examination of the discourse which posits young people as apathetic and disengaged. Thus far, the evidence that finds young people lacking knowledge and interest in politics has been reviewed. The following chapters interrogated two underlying assumptions made by the discourse of apathetic and disengaged youth, namely its linear, teleological understanding of youth and its narrow, unreflexive and unproblematised deployment of 'politics'. The previous chapter further opened up the meaning of the political and interrogated liberalism's public/private divide under conditions of late modernity.

This chapter provides an opportunity to discuss the development of the methods used and the reasons behind those particular methods. As we have already had cause to note, in the research of young people's relationship with politics, reflexivity is crucial if we are to allow participants' practice and understandings of politics to be heard. While any given researcher can only ever produce specific, partial and incomplete knowledge, being aware of the biases and particular knowledge we bring to research helps illuminate some of the limitations of the knowledge we produce. This chapter documents the development of the project, its methods and their justification, and some of my own biases and preoccupations.



## Research Design

During the planning stages of research, I had a broader focus than testing the discourse of youth apathy; I was interested in the ways young adults were 'engaged' with society. With this broader interest I spent some time conceptualising the different ways in which young people could engage with society. Following Ariadne Vromen's (2003) and Nina Eliasoph's (1998) research, both discussed previously, I arrived at a model of young people's modes of engagement with society that included *Activism*, oriented toward social/political change; *Communitarian/Collective* involvements defined by a helping ethic; *Party*, denoting institutionalised politics through the likes of political parties and unions; *Recreational*, denoting involvement with sporting/social groups or volunteering for club or sporting activities; *Individualistic*, denoting 'political' activity undertaken on an individual basis like letter writing, political donations, recycling, boycotts and so on; *Disengagement*, denoting disaffected and apathetic individuals or those who are ironically detached from engagement (Eliasoph, 1998).

As should be discernable, the model tried to cover a range of ways of engaging with society along collective and individual grounds. Even at this early stage, the model was understood as a general guide, requiring context and empirical verification. That is to say that the model was to belong to the research, so that young people's own interpretations of their mode(s) of engagement would count rather than squeezing them into a predefined model. Because 'politics' is a word and practice open to interpretation, some young people may not see their recycling as political, while others may; the research approach was always about trying to be inductive and voicing young people's interpretations of politics and their practices.

Developing this preliminary model of young people's modes of engagement was primarily a sampling tool. It was thought that accessing young people across a spectrum of 'engagement' would furnish the research with breadth to complement the depth provided by using long interviews. Recruitment was to be undertaken by several methods. Firstly, known members of particular groups (political parties, sporting groups) were asked to tell their members about the research. Secondly, snowballing was to be

used specifically in recruiting people from the ‘disengaged’ group. Each interviewee was asked to ask someone they knew who was not involved in organised activities to be part of the research. Thirdly, political/activist, volunteer, community, and sporting groups were contacted and asked to pass on information about the research via the research flier.<sup>51</sup>

In-depth interviews had been decided upon as the means of research due to the real lack of qualitative depth in the area of young people and social/political engagement, as discussed in chapter three. One of the main goals of this research was to actually speak to young people themselves about *their* social and political engagement, rather than theorise (moralise) or further quantify young people’s social/political practices. This goal highlights the exploratory and qualitative dimensions of this research. And as noted in Chapter Three, through a discussion of Henn et al. (2002), in the study of young people and politics, qualitative methods have a greater validity because of the real risk that participants and researchers may not be operating with the same understandings of key terms like citizenship, democracy, and indeed, politics. Qualitative methods, and particularly in-depth interviews, provide for a discussion of the *meaning* of such crucial terms. In a similar vein, the research endeavoured to treat young people as more than data (Harris and Bulbeck, forthcoming), crediting them with being creative social actors capable of responding to the changing world around them and hence of developing new understandings and ways of doing politics.

It was decided that the sample was to span in age from eighteen to thirty years. In part this was based on my previous experience of the difficulty of accessing and interviewing minors (Manning, 2002). More fundamentally, this was because I was interested in how young people who had suffrage understood and practiced politics. In a study of this size it seemed best to use suffrage as a marker and either choose those with it or those without. Choosing those with suffrage means, at least in a legal sense, participants would not be excluded from politics. My use of the term ‘youth’ reflects the discussion of Chapter Two

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<sup>51</sup> A copy of the research flier is included as Appendix B.

where we saw how youth is socially constructed and in advanced capitalist societies typically extends right through one's twenties.

Interviews were to be tape-recorded and then transcribed for thematic analysis, focussing on the ways in which young people undertake and understand social and political engagement.<sup>52</sup>

### **Recruitment, Participants, and the Sample**

As discussed above, the model of young people's modes of engagement was used to identify organizations and means of recruiting interviewees. A range of political institutions from activist organizations like the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom to Oxfam and more community oriented bodies like the Gay and Lesbian Counselling Service were contacted and asked to distribute the research flier. A friend involved with the Labor Party passed on information about the project and myself to numerous young members of political parties. Organizations that draw upon volunteers and considered likely to have young volunteers including, community radio stations, the Animal Welfare League, and Feast Festival (South Australia's queer festival), were contacted. Several sporting clubs we also approached and asked to distribute information about the project. Research fliers were distributed within the hospitality industry, with a view to recruiting 'disengaged' interviewees. In all, nearly 40 organizations were contacted during the recruitment stage. Not surprisingly, the best success was achieved where there was a direct connection between the potential interviewee and the researcher, be it through a mutual contact, someone who had already been interviewed, or when potential interviewees made email or telephone contact with the researcher.

The sample includes 18 in-depth interviews ranging in length between one-and-a-half hours and two-and-a-half hours. The sample can be divided up into three approximate groups:

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<sup>52</sup> A list of questions for the semi-structured interviews is included as Appendix C.

- Group 1: 7 participants, 5 men and 2 women, were involved with political parties;  
Group 2: 5 participants, all women, were involved with activist organizations;  
Group 3: 6 participants, 3 men and 3 women, were not involved in any organized or institutionalised form of social/political participation.<sup>53</sup>

Of course, dividing the sample in this way is far too simplistic. For example, some of the participants involved with political parties saw themselves as activists, while some of the participants involved with activist groups would not describe themselves as activists, and finally some of the participants not involved in any formal social/political participation still understood their everyday lives to be enmeshed with politics. These subtleties and interpretations will, of course, be discussed further in the coming chapters. In the meantime, this way of breaking down the sample allows us to see where participants were recruited from, how many came from particular groups, and the gender make up of the sample.

### *The participants*

I would now like to briefly describe each participant and detail some of their social/political involvements.

**John 21 years** – At the time of the interview, John had been a member and involved with the youth branch of a major political party for about twelve months, and was an office bearer for his students association. He was studying politics and Media, and was a tutor at his boarding house. John regularly writes to newspapers and has called talkback radio; he is a vocal protestor/activist and has a high profile (he appeared on television news at a protest he co-organised). His parents live in remote Australia. John says he has had a very rapid political education: “like I didn’t think either way about John Howard, I didn’t know the difference between the Labor Party and the Liberal Party; I really had no idea before last year.”

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<sup>53</sup> One of the participants in this group was actually involved in some organised social/political participation. She was, however, placed in this group because she does not consider herself an activist and is not involved in party politics. Of course, her understanding and practice of politics will be explored in coming chapters and her being in this group holds no bearing for the analysis.

**Mark 20 years** – Is an office Bearer for his university students association; has worked in the office of a politician; has been a member of a minor political party for about sixteen months; and was a law student at the time of the interview. Mark says he has been interested in politics since he was very young. ‘Came out’ to me during the interview, but was at the time very “closeted” about his homosexuality.

**Paul 25 years** – Joined a major political party in 1996, works for a shadow state minister and holds a senior position within the youth branch of his party. Paul left his honours year of university to pursue his political career. He identifies as a wet liberal, and talks openly about how this is a marginalised position within his party.

**Kate 25 years** – Joined a major political party through university when she was 19 years old. Kate works for a state Member of Parliament, she has previously has done advocacy work in the housing sector for students and through a welfare agency. She describes a family life where politics was simply part of the furniture. Kate says her family is working-class and staunch supporters of the political party of which she is a member.

**Hannah 21 years** – Is a member of a minor political party and holds senior positions within her political party, and campus-based human rights club. She has previously sat on her university’s student union board, and was involved with her students association; campus-based recreational club, and two campus-based action groups. Hannah’s parents live in rural Australia and while she says they are not overtly political, her father paid for her first membership to her political party.

**Peter 21 years** – Is a commerce student and member of a Major political party. He is on an Advisory Committee for his council. Peter describes himself as a conservative liberal and says that politics is regularly discussed in his family home.

**Chris 19 years** – Is a member of a major political party. Was heavily involved in competitive sport throughout high school until injury forced him to stop. Employed as part of the administrative staff in the office of a state government minister. Has been

involved with advising local council and state government on youth issues. Plans to go to university in the near future. Is open about his homosexuality.

**Indigo 22 years** – Volunteers for a Sex Industry Organization doing health and safety (out reach) work, educating girls about sex work. Also involved with sex work activism through forums like Mardi Gras and International Whores Day. Indi has been involved with a sex industry organization for about 3 years and came out as a sex worker about twelve months before the interview. She left school at 15 and her parents when she was 16 years old.

**Monica 30 years** – Monica had just finished her Bachelor of Arts and was doing temporary secretarial work. She tries to work in community-oriented organizations aligned with her politics. Monica is a committed choco-vegan and involved in two women's groups. She spent her 20's in the throws of depression about the state of the world and what she could not/did not do about it. About eighteen months prior to the interview she 'came out' as an activist, and now feels happy and relatively empowered with her activist identity.

**Gillian 22 years** – Has been involved with a women's group and an anti-war group, but recently started her Ph.D. in mathematics and subsequently her involvement fell away. Gillian educated herself in philosophical/political matters via her father's library – he was radical during the 1970s. Gillian is a vegetarian, and particularly concerned about the environment and human rights issues.

**Nicola 29 years** – Has an educational and employment background in social and community work; at the time of the interview she worked for a local council as a youth participation worker. She holds a senior position with a young women's organization, and is one of the few participants to describe herself as a feminist.

**Heidi 21 years** – Was studying information technology and was involved with an indigenous youth organization. She enjoys political rap and hip-hop, is very concerned with indigenous affairs and indigenous youth having a voice. Heidi comes from a very political family, radical/academic/Indigenous father and Chinese-Australian mother.

**Rebecca 22 years** – Fifth year law and science student, involved with a board which funds projects for indigenous communities via money made through mining. She is concerned with the environment, Iraq war, international law issues, Indigenous and social justice issues. Rebecca's father, whom she has no contact with, is a Torres Straight Islander man and the rest of her family is white and lives in the Northern Territory; she visits them during the holidays.

**Helen 25 years** – Has a Bachelors Degree and at the time of the interview worked as a secretary at a university. She was not involved in any collective social or political activity, while she did attend yoga classes. She is engaged to be married and said that between wedding plans, family, and work she does not have time for anything else, while she would like to volunteer or help out at a soup kitchen where a close friend has been volunteering for a year or so. She tends to describe politics as a chore and calls upon her father as a source of factual information.

**Daniel 23 years** – Was a second year Bachelor of Arts student, and not currently involved in any formal collective political or social activity. He was an anarchist and has a long-term interest in politics, but effectively used anarchism to avoid any meaningful political involvement (specialising in drunken rants). Now he would like to get involved in something like student radio. He enjoys talking, thinking and studying politics but is very cynical about how politics operates.

**Patrick 19 years** – Was also a Bachelor of Arts student. He said he has a long-term interest in politics, but was currently not involved in any formal collective social or political activity. Patrick thinks a lot about how he is implicated in supporting different industries and ideas through buying their products. He is a vegetarian and a feminist, and said that his family background provides a rich forum for social/political discussions.

**Philip 21 years** – Was a fourth year law and politics student. He is well informed, likes to discuss politics/philosophy/film with his 'political' friends and his brother, but is not involved in any formal collective social/political activity. Says he prefers the realm of philosophy over politics as it is less grubby, involves less compromise. Politics is something his family speaks about, and he and his family are vegetarian on utilitarian ethical grounds.

**Mary 19 years** – Mary was a second year social work and social planning student. University has largely provided her with her political education. She is now particularly concerned about issues like HECS (Higher Education Contribution Scheme), single young people, and issues of government welfare. Being from a coastal rural town, she also raises concerns about young people from the country being disconnected from the world of work. Mary is the only other participant to identify as a feminist, “but not a mad feminist!”

### *Sample composition*

As noted above, trying to recruit young people from a range of social/political forms of participation was intended to give the study some breadth. As can clearly be seen in the breakdown of the sample, the attempt at recruiting young people involved in activities denoted by a helping/volunteer ethic failed. While some participants had undertaken regular volunteer work, no one from the volunteer agencies contacted was recruited. During the recruitment phase I noted just how few organizations there were that are likely to have large numbers of young people among their volunteer ranks.

The final sample has a relatively even gender make up with eight men and ten women. It includes young members of the Liberal, Labor, and Democrat political parties; participants involved with activist groups, from industry advocacy organizations to women’s groups, indigenous groups, and anti-war collectives; and five young people who are not involved in organised social/political participation. While it is a sample far from representative, for the purpose of qualitatively exploring young people’s understanding and practice of politics, it does provide considerable diversity in the kinds of participation included. From mainstream party politics to incorporated and non-incorporated activist groups, to young people uninvolved in formal social/political participation, the major forms of political participation (including non-participation) are included in this sample.

The sample does, however, have certain limitations. While the sample does include two young women of Aboriginal/Torres Straight Islander (Heidi and Rebecca) and one of Italian background (Nicola), there is little scope beyond them to explore the ways in which ethnicity may shape one’s understanding and practice of politics. Furthermore, with a sample dominated by participants with university education, it does not provide for an exploration of the role social class plays in one’s understanding and practice of



politics.<sup>54</sup> Rurality seems another factor which could shape one's understanding of politics – Hannah talks about this when she says that living in a rural area meant that she and her family had closer contact with local Members of Parliament, making the personal sometimes more salient than the party or politics – but is not pursued in any depth. It seems fair to concede that these lines of inquiry could in fact be projects in themselves. While the sample could be larger and include groups which would provide data on how ethnicity, social class, and rurality shape understandings and political practice, as we have just seen this small sample can shed some light on these issues because of its diversity. Moreover, the sample more than meets the requirements of a primary exploration of the ways in which young people understand and practice politics.

With regard to the 'disengaged' group, those participants not involved in organized or institutionalised social/political participation, from the outset I thought it crucial that this group not be made up of society's marginalised and underprivileged. While the social/political/economic and cultural participation of marginalised and underprivileged young people is a crucial issue for our society, exploring why such young people were disaffected, disillusioned, and even apathetic to politics would be a research project in itself. Moreover, by not including young people who are marginalised or underprivileged the range of barriers to participation that marginalisation can create is removed, thus reducing the number of factors that could contribute to participants' lack of social/political involvement and hopefully providing greater clarity about their lack of social/political engagement. Essentially, I wanted to avoid having young people's disengagement explained away because of their marginalised status.

## **The Interviews**

As we have seen, the project began as a general inquiry into how young people relate to society, specifically focussing on social and political participation. While I always had a personal bias and interest in the political dimensions of the research, it was through the

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<sup>54</sup> It is worth noting that not all participants have a university education, and while no rigorous attempt was made at measuring their social class, participants come from families where their parents held positions across the spectrum of the labour market – from manual work to small business owner to professional.

process of research, and especially the interviews, that the project was further refined to be guided by one central question:

- How do young adults understand and practice politics?

Long interviews were chosen as the research technique for a number of reasons; firstly, because they could provide the qualitative depth that was so clearly needed in the study of young people and politics; secondly, long interviews were seen as a more effective technique, given the research question, than participant observation. Participant observation has been used to great effect in the study of political/apathetic practice, as seen in the work of Nina Eliasoph (1998), and Paul Lichterman's work on personalism and communitarian activism (1996) and the role of talk in identity politics (1999). Such methods are, however, very time consuming and could in turn reduce the number of social/political practices to be researched. Long interviews provided the researcher with the means to speak with young people involved in over 9 different groups. Participant observation of course would have provided different information, and it is most likely that the same range of organizations would not have been accessed due to the great amount of time required by such a method. Interviews also helped with recruitment as interviewees were asked to contact other people suitable for the 'disengaged' group. Interviews provided the researcher with the scope to produce qualitative findings and a greater breadth in the sample. As noted above, they also provide for treating young people as more than just data.

While Appendix C shows a tentative interview structure with numerous questions, interviews were in fact only semi-structured. The long list of questions was designed to cover a range of social/political practice – bearing in mind that when it was compiled the project still had the more general focus of social and political participation – including social/political issues, group and individual activities, work, friends, and family. Specific questions were developed during interviews, and as the interview process progressed certain questions were sometimes left out. In particular, the section headed "Individual and Society" became less relevant as the focus shifted toward politics, and so questions

around one's political efficacy were asked instead. Other questions which developed during the interviews and proved important were about participants' sense of identity, would they describe themselves as an activist or feminist, and asking if the term 'the personal is political' held any meaning for them. I also developed a scenario question wherein participants were asked to imagine they overhear a sexist/racist/homophobic joke and how they might respond, and how have they responded when they have experienced this.

A further important dimension of the interview approach concerns morality. As Have (2004) notes, interviews are often moral events with serious implications for interviewees. I was aware from the outset that researching anything to do with politics would open up an ethical field of some considerable weight. Asking young adults about their involvement in social/political/ethical activities is loaded with meaning and, if the interviewer is not careful, an interviewee could easily feel judged for an apparent lack of engagement. Culturally, we value 'good citizenship' and participation, even if we are unsure exactly what it is. While some participants meet these cultural expectations, by definition those not involved in organised social/political activities would fall short. Hence I felt it most important to dispense with the burden of this expectation by telling participants that I was not involved in any organised social/political activities. Furthermore, this was important even for those who were heavily involved because the weight of these cultural expectations can make one feel like they could always do more; a feeling likely to be heightened in an interview which tried to be exhaustive about participants' social/political involvements.

Noting this attempt at putting participants at ease and removing any sense that I would be judging them and their responses highlights the general approach I took to interviewing. As Have (2004) also notes, interviews are typically hierarchical social exchanges where the interviewer asks questions and the interviewee is to answer them. While I have no illusions that the interviews in this study were anything but an uneven exchange where as the interviewer I asked the vast majority of questions and directed the conversation, I did invite questions and would engage in a certain amount of self-disclosure. For example, by

way of asking about voting I would occasionally acknowledge my own excitement at the prospect of casting my first vote. On other occasions, participants and I laughed about the contradictions often involved in ethical or political consumerism – only buying fair trade coffee, but no doubt consuming a range of other products that have not been ethically or sustainably produced. Inviting this kind of exchange was largely a method of developing rapport with interviewees, breaking down the interviewer/interviewee hierarchy and the social distance it creates, and acknowledging how we are all implicated in complex ethical/political matrices. With some interviews, however, it seemed the only decent and ethical way to respond. For example, the interview with Indi spanned about four hours, in which time she shared a great many personal stories about her work and sexuality, her identity as an activist and her family.

### **Interviews and The Interview Society**

While the research question, and the project's aforementioned interest in injecting young people's voices and understandings, and bringing qualitative depth to the study of young people and politics matches up well with long interviews as a research method, interviews have not been employed uncritically. Following Atkinson and Silverman (1997), the current research does not view interviews as granting access to an authentic self namely, that of the interviewee. Atkinson and Silverman have argued that we live in an interview society, a society in which the interview is pervasive and used "to reveal the personal, the private self of the subject." (p. 309) In Atkinson and Silverman's words:

*The interview society thus affirms the speaking subject, with an authenticity guaranteed as the author of his or her own life. The life is offered, in the interview, as something to be revealed or rehearsed, rather than accomplished or constructed.*  
(1997, p. 315)

They argue that social science, especially in light of the recent explosion in interview based research, risks reproducing the core assumptions of the interview society.

Interviews are, in fact, part of the production of the self, and interview data is something created by both the interviewee *and* interviewer. Indeed, interviewees themselves were sometimes aware of an interview's ability to be part of the narration and production of the self. One of the interviewees of this project said that each time she does an interview she learns something new about herself, and another participant acknowledged that he hoped the interview process would help him understand his lack of social/political involvement. Other participants said that the interview was the first time they had thought about aspects of their involvement or their understandings of politics, and in this sense we can say they were narrating unexamined parts of their self during the interview. While as an interviewer I was conscious that I was part of producing the data of the interview, in some ways the interviewees complicate Atkinson and Silverman's depiction of the interview society. They argue, "... responses are always likely to be couched in an idiom that reflects prior narration. The self is rehearsed." (p. 314) However, as we saw above, some participants used the interviews to continue the narration of their self or to begin narrating 'new' or unexamined aspects of their self. This may in part reflect participants' youth; nonetheless as Atkinson and Silverman note, "The interview is thus a prime technique for the affirmation of selves." (p. 315) And it should not come with surprise or concern that interviews are "a prime technique for the affirmation of selves", for interviews are, after-all, a medium for narrative exploration of the self. Prominent communitarian theorists Alasdair MacIntyre (1981) and Charles Taylor (1989) both highlight the narrative core of the self. Indeed, MacIntyre draws upon Barbara Hardy to show the centrality of narrative in one's life:

*For we dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticise, construct, gossip, learn, hate, and love by narrative. In order really to live, we make up stories about ourselves and others, about the personal as well as the social past and future. (Hardy, 1968, p. 5)*

So while we should expect interviews to affirm the interiority of the self (Atkinson and Silverman, 1997), what is of concern and relevance for the social researcher using interviews as a technique, as Atkinson and Silverman rightly point out, is not to view the

interview as a special means of revealing an authentic self. While we may embrace the centrality of narrative in everyday life, this should not lead us to accepting an uncritical stance in relation to the data produced through the interview.

Clearly, trying to access participants' understandings and reasons for particular activities, whilst acknowledging that interviews *produce* rather than *reveal* personal narratives, and that they are not "any more authentic or pure a reflection of the self than any other socially organized set of practices" (Atkinson and Silverman, 1997, p. 322), creates tension. At times, especially with subject matter like political beliefs or identity, it is almost impossible not to assume a relationship with the interviewee that implies the interviewer *is* accessing an authentic, Romantic self. However, as we shall see in the coming chapters, interviewees themselves eschew a Romantic self, favouring a *relational, interconnected* self where values, beliefs, politics and commitments form over time and through relationships with family and friends, and experiences like travel or racism.

As we have seen, Atkinson and Silverman (1997) argue that interviews are a forum for self-revelation and the endorsement of personal identity, suggesting a more Romantic notion of the individual self. While participants in this study tended to invoke a more social and relational notion of the self, several interviewees told very personal stories in the process of explaining and contextualising their understanding, relationship with, and practice of politics. All the interviews dealt with personal matters and required a certain amount of self-revelation – again highlighting the inherent tension of conducting interviews in the interview society without accepting its assumption that interviews reveal an authentic self – but three of the interviews involved arguably a greater level of self-revelation and, in turn, affirmation of the interiority of the self. And these three interviews have significance for this study because they highlight the ways in which politics can be a *lived, embodied* practice, a central part of one's self. These three participants, in a word, came 'out' during the interview, as a sex worker and activist (Indi), a homosexual (Mark), and an activist (Monica). As we shall see when we analyse

the interviews, for Indi, Mark, and Monica, among others, politics is woven into their very sense of self and daily practices.

Indeed, it was through these early interviews that I began to focus more closely upon how young people understand and practice politics, rather than the more general focus of how they engage with the wider world. These early interviews showed me that one can understand politics in a narrow sense and at the same time be heavily engaged in what might be described as politics (Indi), that embracing a political/activist identity can be a torturous and yet most empowering journey (Monica), and Mark's experience further convinced me of the importance of 'private' matters, like sexuality, for one's politics.

These interviews in particular, raise the issue of empowerment. Atkinson and Silverman (1997) are highly critical of Mishler (1986) and his argument that critical approaches to social research, as opposed to standardised research, can in fact empower the interviewee. While I have no interest in arguing that interviews in general, or indeed that the majority of interviews in this study were empowering for respondents, it is clear that interviews *can* be empowering. As we have already noted, (and as Mishler himself notes) interviews are a means for people to learn something about themselves. Moreover, coming out and coming out stories, especially when received positively, tend to empower the teller of such stories. If we think of coming out as a process rather than a single event, then one is never entirely 'out' of the closet (Sedgwick, 1990). Eve Sedgwick argues that regardless of how 'out' one is one will eventually find themselves in the closet with someone close to them. As a result, coming out is an ongoing process, something which is never complete. And as a process, the person coming out is continually engaged in the deliberate affirmation of self. So, when Monica and Indi came out to me during the interview, *we* were of course affirming the interiority of the self, but there can be little doubt that these tellings also empower and affirm their identities as an activist and a sex-worker/activist. But a Romantic view of the self is curtailed or at least problematised by the fact that these stories are about belonging and community as well as personal identity; Indi and Monica were aligning themselves with *others* and with *communities* – sex workers, queers, and activists more generally.

Conducting research in Atkinson and Silverman's interview society is a fraught business. At once we both call upon a self to account for its actions and understandings, whilst maintaining that interviews cannot reveal an authentic self. Drawing one's attention to the assumptions of the interview society once again serves to highlight the intellectual pervasiveness and cultural currency of Romanticism, for it is a Romantic notion of the self that the interview society perpetuates. Charles Taylor notes the importance of Romanticism in modernity when he says, "Romanticism has shaped just about everyone's views about personal fulfilment in our civilization." (1992, p. 505) Romanticism, so far as the self and identity goes, is here to stay. What seems crucial for the social researcher using interviews is to be aware of the interview society and its assumption that interviews provide privileged access to an authentic self. With this awareness one can see that interviews as a research method, and any given interview, will *produce* particular depictions of the self of the interviewee, rather than reveal *the authentic, stable and secure self*.

An example of how interviews produce certain results can be seen in the present study. As noted above, most of the interviewees eschewed a Romantic self in favour of a self constituted by and through its relationships with others. It seems quite likely that this position was taken up by many of the interviewees because of the kind of questions they were asked. For example, respondents were asked where they learnt about politics/political issues? Inherent in the question is some notion of political education and development. Questions like this betray the researcher's bias and understanding of how an individual's politics comes about. Respondents were also asked about a range of other factors which might shape one's politics, giving further opportunity to provide an answer that goes beyond themselves and suggests a political development and education, and in turn a relational rather than Romantic self.

### **Analysing The Interviews**

Having adopted an inductive approach to this research, allowing the research questions and focus to develop as the project progressed, the analysis of the interviews followed a



similar path. For example, it was respondents themselves who drew my attention to the intertwining of politics and self. While I began the research with an interest in the notion of the 'personal is political', I found this idea, while practiced by many participants, did not resonate at a conceptual level. Thus it was through the interviews, rather than a preconceived notion, that I began to understand the ways in which the participants understood and practiced politics. Similarly, the themes used to analyse the interviews reflect the transcripts and participants' understandings and practices.

Interviews were recorded using a Dictaphone and later transcribed by the author. Half of the interviews were transcribed in full, however time pressures meant that the remaining interviews were selectively transcribed, wherein discussion deemed irrelevant to the research focus was summarised while that which was relevant was transcribed in full.

The interviews were conducted in a range of settings. Many of the interviews were conducted in cafés, others in people's living rooms or in the grounds of a university campus. The most interesting setting for an interview was in the kitchen of a brothel. Indi, as noted above, is a sex worker and while her interview was scheduled to take place at a local café she rang at our meeting time and explained that she was at work and her car had been parked in by a client's and hence could not meet me for at least another hour. She suggested I come to the brothel and conduct the interview there. Having called my housemate to let someone know my whereabouts, personal safety during the interview stage being something impressed upon me by my supervisor, I entered my first brothel to begin my second interview for this project. While Indi did have a legitimate reason for not being able to meet me at the café, she relished bringing me to her place of work. And of course it was a fascinating experience for I was backstage at a brothel and privy to some backstage conversations and behaviours (Goffman, 1969).

As noted above, the model I developed for thinking about young people's modes of engagement was simply that – a model. Through the course of the interview, young people articulated both their understandings *and* practice of politics. Rather than try to slot participants into a model of modes of engagement, I let their interpretations of

politics and their political practice lead the way. As can be recalled from Chapter Three, this is most significant because young people's understandings of politics and its practice has largely been overlooked by social science. This approach prioritises young people's understandings and interpretations over and above those of established political/social research, and credits young people with the ability to interpret and create new meanings and practices of politics.

Notwithstanding my concerted efforts to maintain an inductive approach and hear young people's own account of their practice and understanding of politics, the knowledge produced during these interviews cannot but reflect my biases and preoccupations; as such I have produced partial and incomplete knowledge. Another researcher with different teachings, experiences and interests would have produced different results. I was keen to talk to young people who were not involved with institutionalised politics or social activities, but were also not obviously materially marginalised from politics. I have an interest in feminism and the politics of the new social movements. These interests can clearly be seen in the findings this research produced. This is not the only story based on rigorous qualitative research which could be told about young people and politics.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has charted the present research from a general concern with how young people socially and politically engage with society to its final focus of how young people understand and practice politics. We saw how a model of young people's modes of engagement was used to begin recruiting a sample and how snowballing was used to complement this. Interviews were chosen as the research method because they would be more time and cost effective and importantly because they provided for greater breadth in the sample in terms of the range of institutions and bodies participants were recruited from. The final sample was relatively balanced in terms of gender and for its size it provides a considerable amount of diversity. The discussion of the interview society highlighted the vexed nature of conducting interviews in a society that ubiquitously uses interviews to eulogize Romantic notions of the self. We concluded that narrative, and thus interviews are an important means of affirming and constructing the self, but this

should not mean social researchers adopt an uncritical approach to interview data. Finally, we saw how an inductive approach is also taken for the analysis of the interviews, balanced against participants' political practice and an examination of the social conditions which facilitate understandings of politics that view the everyday as political.

# Chapter 6

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## **Drawing on The Dominant Discourse: Young People and Hegemonic Politics**

### **Introduction**

This thesis employs a qualitative approach to interrogate the popular discourse that young people are apathetic and disengaged from politics. Thus far we have canvassed recent Australian research which provided plenty of evidence that young people lack adequate knowledge and interest in politics. The following chapters undermined the claims of this research through a discussion of the two assumptions the discourse of apathetic youth relies upon, namely that youth is a period of linear transition to adulthood, and secondly, its unreflexive and unproblematised application of a narrow liberal definition of politics. Chapter Four further opened out the meaning and practice of politics in a modernity where public and private have become blurred, where new social movements exploit the permeability of public/private spheres, where an interest in self-fulfilment and expression can support long-term political commitment.

This chapter will show that numerous participants of the current study draw upon the dominant model of politics in their understanding and practice of politics. These young people largely conceive of politics as being about structures and institutions like parliament, government, voting, and elections. Participants' hegemonic understanding of politics was often accompanied by a practice of politics which emphasises the role of parliaments, government, representation, voting, and elections.

Before moving on to discuss the political understandings and practice of those participants who adhere to hegemonic notions of politics, for the benefit of the reader, I would like to briefly note the participants most relevant for this chapter. The following analysis will focus on Hannah (21 years), Paul (25 years), Peter (21 years), and Heidi (21 years). A brief description of all participants can be found in Chapter Five.

### **Hegemonic Understandings of Politics**

Almost all participants, except those discussed in Chapter Eight whose political practice is described as “self as political”, hold hegemonic understandings of politics. Perhaps not surprisingly, those who adhere closest to these understandings were participants who had an accompanying practice of politics which enveloped them in hegemonic politics’ structures and institutions. Hannah, and Paul illustrate these hegemonic understandings in the following excerpts:

*Guess it’s more, I dunno, for me it’s just more about involvement and like tryna effect some change and to make, to stand up and make people listen to you really, like make the government listen to you and make your, make politicians listen to you. (Hannah, 21 years)*

*Um, politics is about getting people elected, it’s about having the power, being part of a party that has the power to do things and I’m quite happy for minor parties to exist I just don’t want to waste my time with them. (Paul, 25 years)*

*Um...um, in it’s simplest terms politics is how society comes to terms with the fact that we’re a society, it’s how you know, we’ve got a million people here it’s how, it’s how we come to terms with the fact that we’ve got to sort of live together and by, and the things that we need to do as a community and we can’t achieve as individuals. Um, it’s about ensuring that the state is somewhere where humans can live. ... Politics is practices about power, in its ideal, it’s about um...giving people the power to make their own choices. (Paul, 25 years)*

*Um, well at it’s most fundamental politics is about the way that people deal with each other, and um, and so there’s – that’s what I was saying everything is political, whether it’s office politics or, or gender politics or whatever. (Paul, 25 years)*

*... I think that government's main role is to sort of create an environment where people can do their own thing... (Paul, 25 years)*

This last quote from Paul neatly summarises his take on the role of government, and highlights his liberalism. What we see in these excerpts is a gradual broadening out of his concept of politics, from the first excerpt where politics is reduced to being about elections and power, to the broader societal level where politics is the means by which we achieve things unattainable to individuals acting in isolation, to the last few excerpts where politics is more about choice and inter-subjective relations. While Paul stretches his initial conception of politics to include the individual level, his focus is firmly set on mainstream political institutions, getting these in line with his philosophical and political views and then leaving people to make their own choices.

For example, while he advocates for the rights of homosexuals, this is about equality before the law and once such legislative changes have been made, people should be left to live their 'private', and hence largely un-political, lives. Such a view does not, for example, see homosexuality as a political act in itself, where loving someone of the same sex may be about challenging dominant notions of masculinity and femininity or heterosexist institutions, and hence something that one lives and practices everyday.

An example of the liberal prioritisation of choice and freedom can be seen in Paul's time as a student politician. While discussing ethical purchasing and boycotting Paul explains he is in favour of ethical purchasing and makes attempts at it himself. However, he thinks the onus should be on individuals to make these choices rather than a group like a student's association or the state:

*I argued against Nestlé brands at university when I was on student councils there. ... I just thought that it was up to the students to be the ethical consumers, like I also argued in favour of installing a cigarette machine in the uni bar. I think that it's important to be an ethical consumer and you can talk about the reasons, but I just wasn't in favour of – I would have been perfectly comfortable for there to be a McDonalds at [name of university]. Like I just think it's up to people to be their own ethical consumers, I, I hate this sort of nanny state protectionism you know, I can be in favour of all of the arguments put forward, but I just think the solutions are wrong.*

These two examples highlight two key aspects of Paul's politics, equality before the law and individual choice. Arguably the examples given overlap; establishing homosexuals as having the same rights as heterosexuals can be understood as a matter of choice, being free to choose one's partner without fear of discrimination. What remains clear is that the political issue in the case of homosexuality is the discrepancy before the law between homosexuals and heterosexuals, *not* the private lives of homosexuals. Such an approach emphasises equality and sameness, fighting for the right of homosexuals to have access and be included as equals in heterosexual institutions like marriage and family law, adoption, IVF (in vitro fertilization) et cetera. Where as an alternative approach like that noted above, emphasises the *difference* between homosexuals and heterosexuals, making the political issue not a matter of legislation but a matter of individual life choices and practices; who one sleeps with, how one has sex, how one identifies themselves, who one includes in their family and so on. The logical extension of Paul's politics (as noted in Chapter Three) is to render our personal lives non-political (or depoliticised) because the political decisions have already been made at an institutional level.

Peter shares Hannah and Paul's focus on the institutions and structures of dominant politics, however he presents a more cynical and hollow view of politics:

*Peter: ... at the moment it [politics] seems to me more the battle of ideas, the battle of outcomes um, to win the public heart, and that's what politics [is]. Or it's the art of bullshit. I don't know, something like that.*

*Nathan: Yep, marketing.*

*Peter: Marketing that's right, PR. [...] Oh to a certain extent for sure, you've gotta sell your idea, you've gotta convince you and me to buy it essentially. So, yeah, marketing's a big part of politics in a crude sense. (Peter, 21 years)*

Here we see politics reduced to winning elections, and the battle between major parties, largely fought through marketing and spin-doctoring. Directly after the above quote, recalling Paul's comments, Peter goes on to say, "There's politics about everything ... I

mean, I'm sure there's politics amongst those waiters and waitresses right now".<sup>55</sup> As we shall see below, this assertion that politics is everywhere is something his ideas and political practice really do not bear out.

Heidi (21 years) provides a similar definition of politics in her comments:

*Nathan: What sort of things pop into your head when you think about politics?  
Whatever it is.*

*Heidi: Yeah I guess I would think of lobbying, that's the main thing I think of when I think of politics, yeah um, like it doesn't necessarily have to be about government and people lobbying them, I think it can be about you know, anything that's up there. I guess yeah, in a leadership role.*

Recalling Hannah's comments, Heidi views politics as involving competing interests, campaigning to have one's agenda heard, politicising particular issues or events – all activities to be undertaken in the public sphere. As Heidi says, her personal life may inform her political views, but this does not mean her personal life is a theatre for politics.

### **Public/Private Divide**

A further feature of this notion of politics is a tendency to favour minimal government intervention in the 'private' sphere – a feature also noted in Chapter Three. In Mark's (19 years) words, "you can't have, you know, the state interfering in a person's individual rights and freedoms." This notion of individual autonomy, rights and freedom, is clearly endorsed by Paul, with his comments above about a "nanny state", and by Peter in the following comments:

*I'm a big believer in small government and minimal government intervention in our lives; I think government is necessary, but not the be all and end all of our lives. I think a lot should be left up to the individual, so, obviously I believe in the markets,*

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<sup>55</sup> The interview took place in a university café.



*and, not only that, but also government not controlling our lives, um not telling us what to do or how to behave per se.*

Peter's depiction of politics here is very reminiscent of the kind that emerged out of the Scottish Enlightenment discussed in Chapter Three. This understanding of politics, as with Hannah, Paul, and Heidi, locates politics beyond private life in a public sphere; what one does in one's private life is depoliticised and primarily about personal choice, rather than linked up with broader social, political, and cultural processes. Such an understanding of politics makes a politicised self and private life almost impossible, because according to this schema, what happens in one's private life is about personal choice and occurs beyond the reach of politics and history. A further example of this separation of public and private can be seen in Peter's call for people to take responsibility for their lives:

*I think everyone feels that the government is responsible for their lives and, and if something – if you fuck up something it's always someone else's fault rather than your own self-doing.*

Within such a liberal framework, it is difficult to see how a person's failings can be caused by institutions and structures beyond their control. In stark contrast to C. W. Mills' (2000 [1959]) call for us to develop a 'sociological imagination' and see the links between private troubles and public issues, the ever present temptation is to interpret any such failings which may occur as being generated by individuals themselves – poor decision making, a lack of discipline or moral fibre, laziness. This approach totally isolates the individual and removes them from the broader social, political, economic, and cultural processes in which they are embedded. Such an individual is rendered completely abstract, recalling Sandel's unencumbered self (1984).

In a way, this is the atomising side of the contemporary freedoms which allow for Lichterman's (1996; 1999) personalised politics or the politics practiced by those participants discussed in Chapter Eight. In a post traditional world, where identities are

no longer ascribed from birth, individuals must increasingly take responsibility for their own lives. As noted in previous chapters, institutions and social structure still play a role in the life chances any individual may have, but the role of such institutions is obscured and life is increasingly understood as shaped by individual choices. Furlong and Cartmel describe the sense that one's life is defined by choice, with structure playing little role in shaping life chances, as an "epistemological fallacy".

*Individuals are forced to negotiate a set of risks which impinge on all aspects of their daily lives, yet the intensification of individualism means that crises are perceived as individual shortcomings rather than the outcome of processes which are largely outside the control of individuals ... Blind to the existence of powerful chains of interdependency, young people frequently attempt to resolve collective problems through individual action and hold themselves responsible for their inevitable failure. (1997, p. 114)*

These comments from Furlong and Cartmel reflect Bauman's characterisation of modernity, discussed in the previous chapter. Bauman links the process of individualisation with the growth of consumer culture and the concomitant erosion of the public sphere: "In the postmodern society of consumers, failure rebounds in guilt and shame, not in political protest" (1991, p. 261). For if individualisation is working as it should, it makes no sense to take one's personal failure into the public sphere and protest. Instead the protest is not realised, being internalised as a purely personal failure.

Heidi's thoughts about what constitutes activism also bolsters the public/private divide maintained by hegemonic notions of politics.

*Nathan: So you mentioned before that you went to ah, a conference in Wales for young activists, would you call yourself an activist?*

*Heidi: Ummmm, I don't know, I don't know, I, I don't think so, because I don't think I take action as much as I should.*

*Nathan: Okay.*

*Heidi: Yeah, so I don't think that I would say that.*

*Nathan: So when you say action, what sort of things are you thinking of, what sort of things do you think you should do or are not doing?*

*Heidi: I guess, I think of like organizing, like you know youth organizing and that kind of thing, like the ability to be able to mobilize people to do stuff. I think that's one of the potentials of [name of her indigenous youth group], to become that, but I think also, yeah I don't think I am that person yet, 'cos I mean, like I've, yeah I've seen structures like in San Francisco and stuff where there's organizations and because of their organizing you know, they can mobilize you know, 2000 young people to go and do something, you know. That kind of thing, like that's what I'm talking about, like that's activism.*

Heidi goes on to say that activism is not entirely about mobilising large numbers of young people; sometimes one person's stand is enough:

*But I think you know, I mean you can be one person and do it, you know being an activist, but you know, that comes back to that safety in numbers kind of thing and – but sometimes you just have to be a stand alone person, saying 'that's wrong', 'cos nobody else will say it.*

These comments provide a very clear description of Heidi's understanding of activism. She feels that generally it involves the mobilisation of large numbers of people to take action, for example through a rally, but sometimes small numbers, even individuals can undertake important protest on their own. In this notion of activism (which also fits very well with Heidi's understanding of politics, as noted above), activism is definitely something that occurs in the public sphere, preferably with large numbers of people. Activism is equated with taking political action in the public sphere.

Like Heidi, many participants were reluctant to describe themselves as an activist because they felt they were not sufficiently engaged in *activism* to warrant such a label.

The reluctance participants showed in taking up an activist identity will be explored in the following chapters.

Following on from this notion of activism as public, political activity, are Peter's thoughts about the second wave feminist mantra 'the personal is political'. This is clearly not an idea Peter is particularly familiar with or one he has spent much time thinking about. When he does pass comment we are presented with his sense that politics is not everything, "I suppose it [personal as political] could be if you made politics the be all and end all of everything." Obviously this is not Peter's preferred *modus operandi*, and one is left with the impression he has little patience for the idea. So while just minutes before these comments he says, "There's politics about everything", he then seems to suggest that one should not indulge in politics' pervasiveness by making it "the be all and end all of everything".

As noted above, many of the participants who held hegemonic notions of politics were also involved in the structures and institutions of hegemonic politics, namely political parties, parliaments, councils, or as office bearers within student's associations. As such, some had experiences which bolstered their interpretation of what politics is and how it works. For example, Paul has attended rallies and protests, but thinks there are more effective ways of bringing about change. He tells a story of attending two large rallies protesting higher education cuts in 1996, and his attempts to stop a funeral march style protest to signal the death of education, ending at the Minister for Education's (Senator Amanda Vanstone) office. Paul makes note that the Minister's mother had recently died and that while the protesters knew this some still went ahead with the protest to publicise the cause. Paul thought the protest was tasteless and disrespectful, and he argues that advocacy through the Liberal Party was a more effective means of affecting the proposed cuts to higher education:

*Um, I remember **how little** any of that [protests and rallies] achieved compared to some of the gains that we made through advocacy through the Liberal Party, where we could get up in front of 300 people at Liberal Party State Council and challenge*

*the Minister Vanstone on her beliefs on certain things, and you know, some of that directly led to, to, to improvements in what happened... I remember the following year there was quite a substantial reverse on some specific issues and some specific areas of funding that we'd specifically talked about in the Liberal Party State Council, and compare and contrast the efficacy.*

Many of the other participants, while not being as enmeshed with dominant politics as Hannah, Paul, Mark, and Peter, still take a keen interest in mainstream politics via the media; watching news and current affairs programs, reading newspapers, listening to social/political issues discussed on the radio or watching political satire like *Backburner*, *The Glass House*, *CNNNN* and *The Chaser*, or Michael Moore's *The Awful Truth*. Daniel (23 years) highlights this in the following comments:

*Well because it [politics] affects me so much it's, yeah I have to have an opinion on it ... To know what's actually happening, yeah. I wouldn't feel right just living and not knowing what's happening.*

It is not surprising that most participants in this study define politics according to the dominant, liberal, regulatory model. After all, it has been the hegemonic form of politics since its inception in the eighteenth century. This notion of politics continues to dominate Australia's political landscape. No other conception of politics has such prominent institutions or enjoys anything like the media coverage it receives; and when the media says 'politics' there is no doubt as to what they are referring to. In such a context, holding an alternative view of what politics is and how it operates demands a good deal of effort and exposure to alternative models.

Beyond its ideological, cultural, and social dominance, for most of the participants discussed above this model of politics delivers. As illustrated most clearly with Paul, these participants are able to make the liberal model of politics work for them, to help achieve their goals and political visions.

As we also had cause to note, this conception of politics makes it almost impossible to view one's life as a political project or to enmesh politics in one's daily life. Connected with this is the way this view of politics limits participants' ability to see how an individual's (including themselves) life chances are shaped by external, social, cultural, and political forces. The hegemonic liberal notion of politics supports the process of individualisation, where individuals are deemed to largely be responsible for their own lives, its success, happiness, failings, and shortcomings.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has shown that many of the participants of this study, particularly those involved with the institutions of hegemonic politics, draw upon dominant/hegemonic notions of politics in their understanding and practice of politics. This view of politics places an emphasis on government, representation, politicians, parties, voting, and elections. It positions politics as something which takes place in the public sphere and in direct contrast to the private sphere and its activities. As participants themselves noted, this kind of politics is largely regulatory and legalistic, functioning to allow people to pursue their own ends with minimal state interference. Thus, the kind of politics discussed in Chapter Three, as emerged during the eighteenth century, shares its central tenets with the notion of politics invoked by most of this study's participants.

It was argued that the participants in this chapter were able to make the liberal hegemonic notion of politics work for them. Taking on this view of politics, however, does have certain limitations and consequences. Firstly, through its division of public and private, it forecloses the possibility of a politicised life or a personalised politics. Secondly, it makes it very difficult to comprehend how a person's life may be shaped by forces beyond their control. The liberal hegemonic notion of politics bolsters the process of individualisation through its ideological cleansing of politics from the private sphere, and its emphasis upon individual choice.

We also saw how activism was framed by this paradigm as political activity (lobbying, protest), which by definition, occurs within the public sphere. The following chapter will

further develop this notion of activism as public, political activity and explore the reluctance of numerous participants in taking on an activist or feminist identity. Chapter Eight will also show that for many participants, maintaining hegemonic understandings of politics conceals 'political' knowledge they hold and 'political' activity they undertake.

# Chapter 7

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## Politics - Tensions in Theory and Practice

### Introduction

The previous chapter showed that many of the participants of this study hold to hegemonic notions of politics, as something which takes place in the public sphere, involving individuals like politicians and party members, and institutions like parliaments, councils, governments, and elections. This chapter will explore some of the tensions in participants' understanding and practice of politics. Sometimes this tension may be a political practice which undermines a participant's hegemonic understanding of politics, in other cases it may be at a personal level. We begin by discussing participants' reluctance at describing themselves as feminists or activists, even while they are involved in activities that might be described as feminism or activism. This discussion provides an opportunity to further unpack the meaning of activism and the public/private divide. The following section examines several participants who maintain a schism between 'real' politics and their own political interests. Finally, we return to liberalism and the tensions its practice holds for Paul and Peter.

### Reluctant Feminists

During the interview stage it was striking to note just how reluctant young women were to label themselves feminist, how uncomfortable they were with the term, and that even those who embraced a feminist label felt the need to clarify what they meant by feminism and what kind of feminist *they* were. The following excerpt from Heidi clearly shows her reluctance and unease about feminism.

*Nathan: Given that you've just mentioned a feminist rapper would you say that you're a feminist?*



*Heidi: Yeah, see I wouldn't say that I was but I guess some people would say that I am. I guess it depends on what you define as feminism, like I don't think that um, like I don't think that feminism has to be synonymous with um, with women trying to be men. I think men and women should be equal, but I think people should realise the fact that men and women are different and, you know, that men and women were created to enhance those differences between each other and to play off of them. But, yeah I guess in some ways I am, but I'm uncomfortable with the term, I don't like it.*

*Nathan: What makes you uncomfortable with it?*

*Heidi: I guess because a lot of, a lot of feminists you know, do, do see, do see that feminism should be becoming like a man and I don't think that it should um, and yeah, that men have no part to play within, within feminism, yeah, I just find it uncomfortable.*

Numerous participants asked about feminism chose to draw this distinction between equality and sameness; there is a real concern that feminism is perceived as working to make men and women the same:

*... Like any philosophy regarding equality, um, there's always the danger of equating, there's always the danger of mixing up equality of possibilities or equalities of resources with equality of **being the same**. And so, if you're talking about women having equal respect and equal resources and equal possibilities to achieve their potential in society, I fully support that and I think that hasn't really totally happened, and that's important. If you're saying that women are the same as men and they should be able to do all the same things and do all the same jobs because they're exactly the same, there's no difference between them, I think that's bullshit; there's physical differences, psychological, you know, we're different beings. Um, so that's where sometimes it verges on the ludicrous I think [laughs].  
(Monica, 30 years)*

Mary (20 years) does call herself a feminist, but she too feels a need to qualify what sort of feminist she is:

*Nathan: Would you describe yourself as a feminist?*

*Mary: Yeah, yep absolutely. Um, I'm not like a crazy feminist [laughs]*

*Nathan: [laughs] A mad feminist.*

*Mary: A mad-man-hater-feminist. But I do think that, that the differences in inequality between men and women are still significant, you know. Like 'cos yeah, men, men still are in the positions of power, they're still in the highest paying jobs, so yeah in that way I think there's huge differences, and yeah, women's interests are still not really that represented, there's still inequality so, I am a feminist in that respect I guess.*

While Gillian (22 years) is involved with a women only peace group, she does not identify as a feminist, nor does she interpret her participation in women only protests as feminist. In her words:

*Nathan: Given that you're involved with [name of group] [...] um, would you describe yourself as a feminist?*

*Gillian: No.*

*Nathan: No? Can you talk a bit about that?*

*Gillian: Um, I just see other issues as more important than that in our country at this time, you know. I guess personally because I've – that sounds a bit terrible: personally because you know, I've never been discriminated against because I'm a woman, I don't care [laughing at herself], yeah. No, I think it's, it's more of an issue in other countries but; yeah, I just don't, from my point of view I don't think it's all that constructive just to look at women, wherein there's usually, in the countries where women are worse off it's usually for a reason and sort of broader problems, so.*

It is also interesting to look at the way she interprets a regular women only silent vigil she has been involved with:

*Yeah so I was just involved with [name of women's peace group] basically because I agree with you know, a lot of their aims, like just, like specific one's like, just – well it started with going to the [name of women's silent vigil group] things which was just a no war thing it wasn't, like it was just against war it wasn't anything particularly feminist except for it was just women that were allowed to protest.*

What is important about this example is precisely that Gillian interprets the silent vigil and her involvement in particular ways and not others. It seems clear that there are many ways in which a women-only silent vigil against war and violence could be interpreted as a feminist act. One suspects that for women of a previous generation – if such vigils were held twenty or thirty years ago – a feminist interpretation of the act might be the dominant one. Yet for Gillian, the fact that she is a *woman* taking part in a vigil with other women protesting against war is irrelevant; it is Gillian's protest as a person who can protest, and remember, that counts.

This example of the silent vigil is also an excellent example of the general premise of the thesis, that politics is polysemic and interpreted and practiced by young people in many and varied ways. Gillian prioritises the vigil or protest against war and violence, while others may highlight the gender dimensions of the act, others still could hold forth the protest itself as an act that makes one more than simply a consumer, and so on. The point is that these acts are interpreted by social actors and the meaning of such acts is not fixed or monolithic. As we shall see in the following section, Gillian's understanding of politics and her activism further highlights the interpretive dimension of politics/activism.

For participants like Monica (30 years) and Hannah, feminism is understood as textual knowledge belonging to a specific time, a knowledge and academic discipline one must fully understand to legitimately claim a feminist identity. Monica says:

*Ummm, you know I haven't spent that much time thinking about feminism, I wonder whether its that relevant to people my age group or younger um, 'cos I don't remember feminism; I don't remember the 70's or whenever it was that it happened, you know. I didn't read the books and stuff that – so I sort of don't really know that much, details of what it was about.*

Hannah makes similar comments:

*Um just like one of my friends she's pretty heavily involved in it and she um, she like, she's read every feminist text there is on earth and knows all about it and stuff,*

*and I'm like, I feel really dumb when she's talking about all that stuff 'cos I don't really get it [laughs] and like I should probably learn about this. And from the bits I know it makes sense so...*

*Nathan: Um, um, would you call yourself a feminist?*

*Hannah: Um, I think like, I think with that, like I don't feel that I can just because I don't know enough about it and I feel a bit stupid if I walk around and call myself a feminist when I haven't even read like whatever the major feminist texts are, 'cos, um that would just be annoying.*

*... um I think it'll be a while until I fully understand or can you know talk about it as – on some kind of intellectual kind of level, so.*

Here we see feminism depicted more as a discipline than embodied knowledge and experience, where all women can be feminists because of their experiences of subordination by men. Despite Hannah's involvement with a women's group and interest in women's/feminist issues, she conveys very clearly her sense of illegitimacy when she says she does not know enough to explain feminism or call herself a feminist.

Monica sees feminism as divided between 'capital F' feminism, which has a textual and expert base and can be found in books and universities, and 'small f' feminism, which seems to centre around issues such as the beauty myth or domestic violence:

*Nathan: Yep so um, would you call yourself a feminist?*

*Monica: Small f.*

*Nathan: As in – when you say small f what do you mean by that?*

*Monica: Well what I mean by that is that I don't actively do anything about feminism, I don't read about feminism or study about feminism or call myself a feminist or join capital F feminist groups, but I'm passionate about those issues. The beauty myth is one and I see them as political and so I s'pose in that sense yeah, I am a feminist.*

As will have been noted from the excerpt above, Monica talks about *The Beauty Myth* (Wolf, 1990). She was asked about reading the book and, in the course of her response, further articulates her division between capital F feminism and her brand of small f feminism:

*Nathan: So you read The Beauty Myth though?*

*Monica: Oh absolutely, it's my bible [laughs].*

*Nathan: I just thought it was, when you were saying you don't read about*

*Monica: No I don't read about feminism as a thing in itself, do you know what I mean? I read about the issues perhaps um, in fact yeah, I'm delighted to read about the issues, it could be genital mutilation, it could be domestic violence, it could be any kind of different issues, it could be equal pay for women, glass ceilings and why women are; you know, why am I still a typist when you know I've got huge experience and skills? Um, these are weird questions, how does this happen? Um, so all those kind of, yeah I would read about the issues but I wouldn't actually go and read a history of feminism or um a feminist text book to study up about feminism itself, I'm not really that interested in it as a – I don't know what you call it – a theory.*

It is fascinating to see how Monica constructs feminism and in turn her relationship with feminism. As was noted in both Gillian and Hannah's understandings of feminism, there does appear to be a shift away from the idea of feminism and feminist knowledge being something one has access to because one is a woman, and towards a notion of feminism as expert discourse or academic discipline. More specific to Monica is the way she disavows herself of a feminist identity because she is not interested in or does not know about capital F feminism or feminism as a theory. In a sense it is as though Monica has gone to great lengths to say she does not fit the proper definition of feminism; after all, who other than feminist academics and students of feminism actually examine the history of feminism or feminism as a theory? It seems reasonable to suggest that as someone who is a member of a women's peace network; regularly protests at a women only silent vigil; is "delighted" to read about feminist issues and is passionate about the ideas of *The Beauty Myth* (1990), Monica has plenty of cause to call herself a feminist if she wished.

All participants asked about feminism, whether they embraced a feminist identity or not, felt the need to qualify what they meant by feminism and what sort of feminist they were. Most participants were reluctant to accept a feminist label and remain uncomfortable with the term. It is striking that while many young women are ambivalent about feminism (Skeggs, 1997; Wilkinson and Mulgan, 1995, pp. 89, 92), most of the young women cited above (Heidi, Hannah, Gillian, and Monica) are actively involved with activities that can be described as feminist, and yet they remain ambivalent and eschew a feminist identity. From the comments made by participants above it seems reasonable to suggest that much of the reluctance they display over being labelled a feminist stems from the stereotype of feminists as "manhating, lesbian, boiler-suited, fat and ugly" (Bulbeck, 2001).

## **Reluctant Activists/*Zōon Politikon***

Somewhat in parallel to the above discussion of participants' reluctance at embracing a feminist identity was their reluctance at accepting the label of activist, or seeing themselves as inherently political. Unlike their ambivalence about feminism, participants' reluctance at accepting an activist identity often reflected their understanding of politics as constituted by a public/private divide. An activist identity was regularly understood as denoting someone who was particularly politically (publicly) active outside mainstream politics, resulting in numerous participants thinking they were not active enough to qualify as activists. Beyond this, other participants constructed a divide between their (political) interests and 'real' politics.

A counter interpretation, which in part was encountered in Chapter Four, would claim that young people's reluctance in claiming a feminist or activist identity is more a symptom of the fragile form of individualism which pervades contemporary society. Following this argument, with society's shift from Riesman et al.'s (1961) inner-directed personality or Rieff and Lasch's communities of tradition and obligation toward other-directed selves and a culture of narcissism, society is producing individuals with a much more fragile sense of self, one predicated on the acceptance and approval of others, rather than adherence to internalised values, moral codes, and traditions. This shift marks the loss of individuals who draw from within themselves "what should be done independent of the opinion of others" (Gauchet, 2000, p. 36).

While there may be some merit to these arguments, and few would doubt that the old verities of community and tradition, often closely linked with religion, have generally languished in recent decades, replaced in large measure by consumerism, what is most significant, is that it is the hegemonic liberal conception of politics and its public/private divide which curtails the interpretation of many activist related activities as *activism*.

Heidi's sense of activism as being about mobilization, protest, political action in the public sphere, was noted in the previous chapter. When talking about an activist organization in San Francisco she said, "... they can mobilise you know, 2000 young people to go and do something, you know ... that's what I'm talking about, like that's activism." Heidi also said she would not describe herself as an activist because she does not take action as often as she should. Many other participants held a similar understanding of activism (John, Hannah, Rebecca, Gillian, Philip, Mary, Daniel). When Hannah was asked if she would describe herself as an activist she replied:

*Um, I guess lately I would because I have been involved in lots of like activism, but um yeah I guess I'd like to think of myself as one, but that um, that I have been contributing to some kind of, to activism on campus at least, so yeah I think I would, in a kind of loose... (emphasis in original)*

The reluctance is obvious in this excerpt; even at the end she will not claim the activist label. It is as though she is not legitimately entitled to call herself one, like she has not completed some imaginary quota of activism hours to qualify. It is also important to note the palpable link between activism the action and an activist identity; the more activism she undertakes the more legitimately she can claim an activist identity.

This notion of activism, as we shall in the following chapter, stands in stark contrast to that of Monica, Nicola, or Patrick, for whom politics or activism may include, breaking out of the nothingness of personal life, thinking about something like feminism or deciding what to have for lunch. For these participants, politics could and often did, take place within one's 'private' life. The difference between the views here illustrated by Heidi and Hannah, and those of Monica and Nicola, is not just that they understand politics as also occurring in a person's 'private' life, but that activism resembles more a state of mind than a list of activities, which, when undertaken qualify one for use of the label 'activist'. As we will see, Monica is very clear about the importance of embracing an activist identity, and that it has little to do with the actual forms of activism she was involved with; it was about changing the way she saw herself, changing her identity. While Nicola places an emphasis on the thinking side of activism, viewing political action as largely a consequence of one's thinking, a matter of following through on one's ideas.

If we accept Heidi and Hannah's definition of activism, then activism only counts when it is done in the public sphere, conforming to established practices like rallies or other forms of public protest. Paul Lichterman has also found a focus upon "doing" as constituting real politics or activism (1999, pp. 119 – 120) This means remaining captive to liberalism's rules and logic of politics and what counts as politics, where there is a

clear divide between public-political and private-non-political. When activism is equated with taking public, political action, unless that action itself questions the public-political/private-non-political divide, politicisation of the self and the new opportunities for political action within 'private' life it reveals, are systematically denied.

Following Heidi and Hannah's conflation of activism with taking public, political action, acquiring the label of 'activist' is an almost bureaucratic process of undertaking certain actions, like organising a rally. If one ceases to take part in such activities, it follows that in turn one is no longer entitled to the label of activist. Gillian made this point when she said she would not currently describe herself as an activist because she has not done much activism of late. For Monica and Nicola on the other hand, activism has a lot more to do with one's sense of self and thinking. Their notion of activism is more akin to a state of mind, worldview or mind-set. Picking up Monica's emphasis on self-perception and identity, and breaking out of the nothingness of personal life, activism is about realising one's potential agency, one's ability to affect change. For Monica and Nicola being an activist is an identity, not a label that denotes a set of activities one undertakes.

An analogy with homosexuality may help to further elucidate Monica and Nicola's sense of activism. As we have seen, their interpretation of activism is more akin to an identity which has a set of associated practices, but is not defined by such practices, like homosexuality. If one was to apply Heidi's view of activism to homosexuality it would be like saying one does not have sex with members of the same sex often enough or to a proper extent for one to count among the ranks of homosexuals. Such a proposition makes little sense; one is not a lesser homosexual because they do not or only rarely have homosexual sex. Homosexuality is an identity, and changing such an identity is only tangentially linked to bodily practices. As this analogy makes clear, from Monica and Nicola's perspective it makes little sense to think of oneself as an activist *only* when one is engaged in activism, or *only* when activism is frequently undertaken.

It is also interesting to think about what counts as activism in Heidi's view. As we saw above, she contrasts her indigenous youth group with 'real' activist groups who can



mobilise large numbers of young people. In effect, Heidi is drawing a distinction between the sort of work that goes into building the infrastructure that makes such mobilisation possible, and the mobilisation itself. Activism is confined to the actual act of mobilising people – putting on a protest – rendering the sort of institution and infrastructure building she does with her group as outside of activism proper. This division of labour seems analogous to a backstage/front stage divide, where only work which will actually be seen in the public sphere, at a protest, counts as activism – the planning, discussions, thinking and research that go to putting on such an event are excluded.

Drawing on Helen's (25 years) interview further highlights some of the 'private' dimensions involved in being an activist or undertaking political action. Helen describes herself as the kind of person who will speak out about things she does not believe in. She says that if there were an issue she believed in she would get involved, and that she has and will continue to speak out against things she does not agree with in the workplace:

*... I haven't really heard of any issues that would warrant me attending a rally, um, yeah, I would probably go to one um, if I believed in the cause. ... I've signed numerous petitions for various causes from trivial stuff right through to really important things ... Um, but you know, if something presented itself I would definitely get involved and I like to think I do speak up when there is a problem. Um definitely in the work place, things where I can make a difference I will, I wont just sit back and tolerate unacceptable behaviour, um...*

Helen goes on to talk about an example of bullying in her workplace that she spoke out against. While Helen does not attend rallies or regularly make monetary contributions to charities or social/political organizations, nor is she a member of a social/political organization or a volunteer, and she does not write letters to politicians or the local newspaper or contribute to talkback radio, she does do some things to contribute to issues she is concerned about. Significantly, she views herself as someone who will speak out, take action, or get involved with issues she believes in.

In light of these comments and the fact that Helen began university the same year the Coalition government increased and restructured the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS), Helen was asked if, during this time, she took part in any of the many rallies and protests that tens of thousands of students took part in around the country:

Helen: ... I mean even at uni, in the three years I was there, there wasn't really anything to get involved in. We didn't storm up to the

Vice Chancellors office or anything, everything was, was fine. I think we were quite lucky, I think the hard work was done for us back in the 70s and those sorts of times, women's rights; I think now we're enjoying the hard work that they went through um, yeah I dunno.

*Nathan: So what um, when were you at uni from?*

*Helen: '97 to '99.*

*Nathan: Okay, so um, 'cos that's a similar time frame to me, um, you weren't involved in the higher ed[ucation] protests about increasing HECS and things like that.*

*Helen: [shakes her head]*

*Nathan: No?*

*Helen: [laughs] Probably didn't know about it, yeah I don't know. Yeah, no nothing was really put under my nose um, no, no, no. No, I didn't even know that was going on; isn't that terrible?*

It is striking that Helen was unaware of this. Increasing HECS fees, especially for those beginning university in 1997, was a big issue. There were several national days of action and numerous local protests. What is important about this excerpt is that there were highly visible issues, and issues which directly affected her, that Helen could have got involved with if she wanted. In contrast, she describes her time at university as relatively uneventful. An example like this suggests that a large part of getting involved in issues or political activity, of any ilk, is the stuff of putting things under your *own* nose and in your *own* face. As will be discussed in the following chapter with participants like Monica, much of the work an activist may do is sourcing an alternative story or information. In contrast, Helen has a much more passive orientation to political involvement and expects that issues which need her help will somehow come to her attention, even though, by her own account she does little to keep abreast of politics and current events. In stark contrast to the notion of activism discussed above, where activism is equated with taking political action in the public sphere, the example of Helen highlights the critical 'private' activism or work that may lead to a political act in the public sphere. Activists and activism do not exist solely within the public sphere; there is a great deal of activism that takes place in what is commonly understood as the 'private' sphere. The idea that politics can take place in the 'private' sphere will be explored in detail in the following chapter.

### ***'Real' politics versus my 'political' interests***

Connected with participants' shunning of an activist identity are those participants who understand politics in such a way as to set up a schism between 'real' politics and their own interests – which are potentially political, but only sometimes defined as such.

Gillian and Monica largely understand their involvement with, among other things, peace and women's groups as non-political because it does not relate to mainstream, hegemonic politics.

Gillian has been involved in organising very large anti-Iraq-war protests, in total mobilising over one hundred thousand people to protest. When asked if she thought the actions of her anti-war group were political, she answers no:

*I just don't think it's um, I don't think it is to further the aims of any particular political party or even a, really a political cause, because pacifism isn't political in its essence. ... Well it was about, but it was about you know, saving the lives of innocent people and that had nothing to do with politics.*

As she rightly points out, it could be political; it depends upon one's definition of the political. What is salient here is that Gillian does not see her involvement and protest against war as political. She betrays her narrow and orthodox understanding of politics; because the rallies were not to further a particular political party, or in her mind a political ideology, they were not political.

One of the most intriguing things about the way Monica understands politics is that she does not consider herself a political person. Like Gillian, Monica sees herself, in simple terms, as concerned with humanitarianism and environmentalism. Both women also share the notion that these concerns are not (as Monica would say) part of 'capital P' politics. While Gillian has a narrower understanding of politics, which means she does not define herself as political, Monica feels that she knows little about 'capital P' politics and thus is not political.

*Like you talked about [me] being politicised at an early age and stuff, but the interesting thing about it is I wouldn't see it that way. Um, and I was, I always describe myself as not being a political person and I would even now, and that's probably quite bizarre because I've just sat here and given you a whole range of strong political views ...*

Monica explains this perplexing self-definition as the result of her family not talking about ‘capital P’ politics:

*Nathan: And what about your family, you were talking about that justice was something that was talked about, um did you grow up in a family where like ‘capital P’ politics was spoken about?*

*Monica: **No never ever!** I’m, that’s probably why I don’t see myself as political and I say I’m not a political person and ‘cos I don’t really understand it on a you know, I’m not well informed on a ‘capital P’ theoretical kind of level; you know, we **never ever** discussed politics with a ‘capital P’ in our house, it was just never talked about. Um, I envy those people who had interesting kind of fascinating philosophical discussions as kids because we didn’t, but we just talked about justice and like stuff you’d see on TV and is that fair and why is it happening, and power, where’s power coming from, who’s involved, what’s their agenda? So that’s, but that’s all kind of small p politics.*

As we shall see in the following chapter, while Monica has a far broader definition of politics than Gillian, she nonetheless invokes the much narrower definition of ‘capital P’ politics when she considers herself and her political practice. As a result, Monica’s political practice and interests are measured against a political yardstick she has little to do with, and not surprisingly she falls beyond its bounds.

Indi (22 years) maintains a similar split between her political interests and involvement with sex work politics and mainstream hegemonic politics. Indi has been involved in advocacy, representation, and lobbying within the sex industry. And while she also employs her self and lifestyle to challenge dominant discourses about sex work and women and sex, she says that she is “not a very political person”. Indi separates out her political knowledge and practice relating to sex work from a broader political sphere, rendering her ‘un-political’:

*... as I said, I'm not a very political person. I'm not educated enough in it, so I don't feel very confident talking about politics – I just think it's a whole lot of people getting the world wrong, basically.*

*I'm not really educated about politics.*

*Indi: I wouldn't like to do anything political ... Yeah, political stuff, don't wanna do that.*

*Nathan: Don't wanna do that. Why wouldn't you want to do that?*

*Indi: Because I don't understand the political table [laughs] nah, I don't understand it very well, and just people's guidelines, I'm too open minded ... I have thought about it, but I don't know about joining parties and stuff really, I'm more of an independent person. ... My focus is more on the sex worker stuff. We were thinking about starting a sex worker party.*

Indi understands politics as “a whole lot of ... ugly fat blokes with glasses crapping on ... getting the world wrong basically.” This political sphere is the world of Canberra politics, John Howard and Kim Beazley<sup>56</sup>, taxes, inflation and unemployment. With this understanding of what counts as politics, ‘real’ politics, Indi’s potentially political knowledge and practice relating to sex work is defined as beyond and separate from politics.

Philip on the other hand, does not construct ‘politics’ in opposition to his own political interests; he sets up a divide between philosophy and criticism, and politics. As an avid follower of mainstream hegemonic politics and a keen student of philosophy, Philip feels himself torn between the ability of politics to affect change and his preferred position in relation to politics, that of external observer and critic.

Philip says he prefers the realm of philosophy to that of politics, as politics is fickle:

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<sup>56</sup> John Howard is Australia’s Prime Minister and Kim Beazley is the leader of the Australian Labor Party and Her Majesty’s Opposition.

*Philip: I prefer philosophy.*

*Nathan: Okay, why is politics fickle?*

*Philip: I think sort of by its nature, democracy is a little populist and then [Nathan: "Ah, it's platonic". Both laugh] ... Sometimes I think if I put my politics into its fullest then it might become some sort of totalitarian regime [both laugh], so I try and stay away from that. But anyway, um yes, so sometimes I think the best decision or outcome can't be arrived through democracy.*

For Philip, the appeal of philosophy lies in its consistency, "...it's a bit idealistic, but I like the consistency, say with one principal that you can apply to all things, and I like the rationality of it." He likes the idea of engaging with politics via philosophy, "I'd prefer to tackle it [politics] from that [philosophical] side perhaps; it seems less grubby, perhaps [laughs]".

He is nonetheless keenly aware of the need for more than just criticism:

*Ah yeah, um well firstly, [laugh] I'd just like to sort of say that with the politics I understand that I guess it's the best sort of system you can have, it's just I'd still – I'll leave it to them essentially. ... Well I think there's, I wouldn't say I enjoy that, I like [laughs] criticizing it [politics], but there's a part of me that, as I said before, I perhaps feel that I should be a little more active because, as I said, realistically, it's the only system you've got and if you want to achieve something that you want then you've got to participate rather than just criticising.*

While Philip may not be involved with mainstream hegemonic politics in any way which could be measured by the kind of surveys discussed in Chapter One, he is far from simply being apathetic and disengaged. His position in relation to politics bears more resemblance to Harris' notion of disengagement through cynicism and critique (Harris and Bulbeck, forthcoming). Philip has genuine criticisms of politics, which while they may risk his participation in change, leave him unwilling to embroil himself in mainstream hegemonic politics.

### *Summary*

Thus far we have seen the reluctance many participants have in taking on a feminist or activist label, or understanding themselves as political animals. All participants asked about feminism felt the need to explain what they meant by feminism and what kind of feminist they were. Numerous participants equated activism with undertaking political acts in the public sphere. It was argued that this notion of activism is framed by the liberal paradigm's public/private split, where only actions undertaken in the public sphere can be understood as 'political'. Moreover, this notion of activism stands in stark contrast to the understanding of activism proffered by participants Monica and Nicola, where activism is more about identity and mindset than the public, political undertakings of individuals. Helen was used as an example to further highlight the 'private' dimensions of activism, namely research and sourcing alternative information. The following section showed the ways in which several participants understand politics such that 'real' or 'proper' politics is constructed in opposition to their own political interests and practices. This meant that participants' notions of what counts as politics devalued their own interests and participation to the extent that they saw themselves as un-political, lacking the knowledge to participate in 'real', 'capital P' politics.

What the discussion thus far has highlighted is the pervasiveness and dominance of the mainstream, hegemonic notion of politics canvassed in Chapters Three and Six. Even though several of the participants operate outside mainstream politics in terms of their political interests and practice, they have been socialised within a political order which maintains a public/private split at its bedrock and prioritises institutions like parliament, councils, parties, elections, and politicians. As a result, while their political practice and definition of politics, as discussed in the following chapter, operate outside mainstream hegemonic politics, they cannot completely extricate themselves and their understanding of politics from its dominant hegemonic form. While trying to practice politics beyond the mainstream, numerous participants remain captive to the dominant paradigm and interpret their political interests and practices accordingly.

## **Tensions of Liberalism**

It is most noteworthy that even for those participants who adhere very closely to classical liberalism, namely Paul and Peter, tensions within their political practice are inescapable. Chapter Six found Paul, as a socially progressive liberal, abiding by the hegemonic definition of politics. And yet, at the same time, during the course of the interview he reveals just how personally he takes politics and also the role that his emotions play:

*I think that had I not made the friends that I'd made and could see that um, there was potential to make change within the party ah; that was the only thing that kept me in the party when it was going down directions that I wasn't very comfortable with, from time to time. And that's been a sort of constant theme, there's always times when the party will make decisions or the party leadership will make decisions you're not comfortable with, and you've got to weigh up whether walking away is going to be better for your soul or [exasperated laugh] or, or whether it's one of those challenges that you achieve more by staying in.*

*Paul: ... I mean it's [campaigning and politics] a competition of ideas both within and between the parties*

*Nathan: Hmmm*

*Paul: And um, the bit between the parties is the fun part, but within the party is just about, um, maintaining a party in a state that you've got some sort of respect being a part of. And that's really important to me but, and that's why I do it but, I don't enjoy it.*

What is significant about these excerpts is that, in stark contrast to liberal notions of subjectivity, they show that in some ways Paul's political views are *constitutive* of his self, rather than mere attributes he has. If his political party heads in directions that lead him to think about how it will affect his soul, there can be little doubt that his political views are more than an abstract set of principals he invokes at work and uses to guide his political decisions: they are a part of his very being. And as Sandel (1984) points out, a community which engages the identity as well as the interests of a subject, is a community beyond that which liberalism's unencumbered self – with its pre-existing



identity – can know.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, Paul refers to the importance of friends and community when the party heads in directions that deviate from his progressive liberalism. In this context Paul bears little resemblance to liberalism’s unencumbered self, discussed in Chapter Three. Here he seems a product of his political views, friendships and community, more akin to a member of an Aristotelian style political community than Kant’s transcendental self or Rawls’ original position/unencumbered self.

The tension found in Peter’s political disposition, on the other hand, is not something he is necessarily aware of. When analysing Peter’s political views and practice from a perspective critical of the liberal divide he maintains between public and private, it can be argued that Peter’s liberalism conceals political choices and dimensions of his life.

One example of how Peter undermines the liberal divide between public and private and implicates his ‘private’ life in ‘politics’ can be seen in his concerns about and avoidance of mass-produced animal products, additives, supplements put into food, and genetically modified crops. Peter’s family only eat free-range chicken and eggs, and when discussing these concerns he says, “I just think there’s a big unknown...for example chickens, mass produced, hormone stuffed, can’t be natural, can’t be good.”

It is important to note Peter does not go into much detail, and his concerns about mass-produced foods and genetically modified crops are couched within a health context. He does not make any links between his own avoidance of these products and their potential to affect the practices of the food industry, nor does he talk about these practices as boycotts. Hence, while it would be inaccurate to describe Peter’s avoidance of Inghams’ chickens<sup>58</sup> or genetically modified foods as political action, or evidence that his self can be the locus of politics, it does indicate that even Peter’s depoliticised private sphere is not impervious to politics. His liberalism, however, largely renders these practices matters of personal choice for the health conscious. Here we see classical liberalism

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<sup>57</sup> In Sandel’s words, “No project could be so essential that turning away from it would call into question the person I am.” (1984, p. 86)

<sup>58</sup> At one point Peter actually says, “don’t trust Inghams’ chickens.”

unable to accommodate a fluid boundary between private and public, unable to link the private sphere with a politically pregnant language, latent with the political opportunities of 'private' practices. Regardless of Peter's inclination toward politicising his 'private' life, this example shows how his orthodox understanding of politics saps the potentially political meaning out of his private life. Classical liberalism cannot provide for the sorts of private/political opportunities opening up in late modernity (Sheller and Urry, 2003).

While Peter's liberal, hegemonic notion of politics remains largely intact, what is salient is that Peter's liberalism is unable to furnish him with a language which could realise the political potentials lurking in his private practices and self. Even someone like Peter, whose private/public divide appears solid, is unable to prevent political opportunities from seeping into his private life and practices. Of course, while he cannot avoid this in late modernity, he does still have a choice to pursue such opportunities or leave them dormant. Unfortunately, unless Peter is willing to significantly muddy the waters of his liberalism, the choice to politicise his self and private life remains hidden. It is ironic that a political doctrine which places so much importance on the freedom of the individual to choose should be concealing a significant political choice, that of politicising one's self.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has discussed some of the tensions within participants' understanding and practice of politics. It was shown that numerous participants were reluctant to accept the label of feminist or activist. Furthermore, all participants felt the need to explain what they meant by feminism, and if they identified with feminism, just what kind of feminist *they* were. We have seen that several participants equate activism with undertaking political action in the public sphere. It was argued that this way of understanding activism stands in contrast to approaches that view activism as an identity or mindset. Moreover, focussing on the public-political action of activism means being beholden to liberalism's public/private divide, where only action undertaken in the public sphere can possibly be counted as political/activist activity. Helen was used as an example to further highlight some of the 'private' aspects of activism, namely research, or finding alternative information.

Following on from the discussion of participants who eschew an activist identity was a section which explored the way several participants constructed divisions between ‘real’ or ‘capital P’ politics and their own (political) interests. It was argued that these tensions can be read as further evidence for the hegemonic status of the kind of politics discussed in Chapters Three and Six. Those participants, who discount their activism and view it as inadequate for the label activist, effectively invoke the dominant liberal paradigm of a public/private divide when interpreting their actions. Those who set up a divide between ‘real’, ‘capital P’ politics and their political interests and practice, invoke the dominant notion of politics as a yardstick by which to measure their own interests and practices. While some of these participants, as will be further discussed in the following chapter, choose to operate outside mainstream hegemonic politics and its institutions, the mainstream liberal paradigm of politics remains hegemonic, and as such, defines the parameters of the political: what legitimately counts as politics, where politics takes place, and who can legitimately take part in politics.

The final section of this chapter returned to two of the participants of this study who hold most closely to the dominant liberal paradigm of politics, Paul and Peter. With Paul we saw that, contrary to liberal views of subjectivity, his emotions and emotional ties play an important role in his practice of politics. Beyond this, it was argued that Paul’s politics were constitutive of him, rather than an abstract set of principals he invokes at work or only when doing politics. While with Peter it was argued that in spite of his best efforts at staying true to liberalism’s’ public/private divide, he is unable to prevent political opportunities from seeping through into his ‘private’ life.

The following chapter will develop this theme of the permeable or indeed collapsed public/private divide, through its discussion of those participants who practice a politicised ‘private’ life and self.

# Chapter 8

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## Polysemic Politics

### Introduction

Having shown that many participants hold to the dominant notion of politics and that they also encounter tensions in their understanding and practice of politics, this chapter will explore the notion that politics is polysemic. The first section will discuss those participants for whom politics is a daily, embodied practice. These participants revel in and are part of the disintegration of the public/private divide. Connected with their approach to politics, which locates them as actors in environmental, industrial, and social/political/cultural change, is a model of self which reflects the interconnectedness of individuals and actions in late modernity. The following section returns to the idea of disengagement through cynicism, discussed in Chapter Three, and finds clear evidence that some participants of this study have chosen to disengage from hegemonic politics as a result of their experiences and cynicism. The final section will discuss the role of reflexivity or *phronêsis* in the political practice of several participants.

As the discussions of Chapters One and Three made clear, previous studies of young people and politics have missed or excluded aspects of young people's political repertoire. As such, I will spend more time with the participants in this chapter to explore the ways in which they understand and practice politics and how it differs from what has been produced by earlier research.

### Collapse of the Public/Private Divide – Self as Political

Numerous participants of this study understand and practice politics in ways which locate politics squarely within the 'private' sphere. These participants, for example, view what they eat, what they buy and choose not to buy, where they bank and invest, the kind of

work they do, and how they speak and treat others, as important ethico-political acts. Their political practice rests on the notion that what one does in ‘private’ is relevant and has real effects beyond its ‘private’ context. While, as noted in the previous chapter, participants like Monica may not describe their decision to be vegetarian or involved with peace groups as ‘political’, they do understand these actions as part of broader processes and as having the potential to affect change. In what follows we shall see a range of ways in which the participants of this study politicise their private life and identity.

### *Monica*

Some of the dimensions of Monica’s political understanding and practice have already been discussed. In the previous chapter we saw how she distanced herself from feminism despite her keen interest in feminist issues and participation in women only peace groups. In a similar way she divides politics between capital and small ‘p’ politics, rendering herself unpolitical because she feels she knows little about ‘capital P’ politics. Nonetheless, there are a number of ways in which Monica is highly politically engaged; she goes so far as to politicise her very identity.<sup>59</sup>

For about ten years, Monica was caught in a vicious cycle of inaction, depression, and despair at the state of the world. Her depression, at least in part, fuelled her inaction and her lack of action in turn fuelled her depression, further eroding her sense of self-worth and of course her ability to act. Some years ago, Monica broke out of that cycle by getting involved with political protest and dissent. She now talks about “the politics of powerlessness” as a political reality which works to disempower and isolate people, leaving them feeling as though any disagreements they may have – with for example their government or issues like globalisation or international bodies like the United Nations or The World Bank – are only personal views and hold no currency with the rest of society.

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<sup>59</sup> The story of Monica becoming an activist can be understood as a coming out story, in the sense that a gay or lesbian person who publicly embraces their sexuality is said to have ‘come out’. While of course the intricacies of embracing a deviant political identity and a deviant sexual identity vary greatly, the underlying shift is that of an individual accepting what largely remains a deviant identity.

Of course, if this force were successful, and one did feel alone in their grievances, then problems would almost certainly feel insurmountable.

What Monica is describing we have encountered at several times throughout this thesis. Habermas and Bauman would see this situation as connected with the disintegration of a forum in which politics can be discussed, as part of the colonisation of the public sphere by the private. Bauman's analysis also alerts us to the social isolation Monica was experiencing as a result of processes of individualisation and the loss of stronger social bonds and communities. Christopher Lasch and Philip Rieff and other communitarians like Bellah et al. (1985) would highlight Monica's lack of connection with religious or civic traditions and their history of social/political involvement through duty and moral obligation. While Beck (1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; 2002), Giddens (1991), and Lash (1999) would also highlight individualisation, but with perhaps more emphasis on Monica's potential to break out of the nothingness of personal life, to practice a kind of politics that would see her everyday decisions as political, to think of her life as a political project (Lichterman, 1996; 1999), where she could form new commitments and traditions.

Monica describes her thoughts on how politics operates to marginalise and overwhelm individuals:

*... so much of the way things are working in this you know, period of history, through the media and through politics um, there's a lot of disempowerment, there's a lot of messages coming out that it's all been decided from the top and you can't do anything about it, and you hate what's going on but you're not important, you're insignificant, you're just this little nobody – ant basically. And there's a lot of isolationism, um there's a lot [...] coming out which makes people feel isolated and you basically feel like you're the only one that hates what's going on, or you're the only one that can see through or you know, like you're a weirdo 'cos you've got this opinion and it's made to look like nobody else shares it. And I think; I see that*

*as being very political, I think that's actually how the whole system is working at the moment...*

Monica returns to this idea later in the interview and says:

*... I thought about it for years and years and I came to the conclusion, I'm pos-I'm convinced it's political, it's the way that politics is working and it's become more obvious in the past year or so where you get the Prime Minister of Australia coming on TV going, 'I don't care what the people think, there are times when the Prime Minister knows best and he should do what he thinks best regardless of what the people of Australia think'. And I think, 'Well there it is, it's now being stated', that kind of politics of um, we rule from the top; you guys don't count; we're not listening; we don't care what you think; you can't do anything; you're powerless because we tough men of the world are running everything. I think that is really being propagated and it's really a political fact...*

As noted above, Monica broke out of the “nothingness of personal life” by attending rallies/protests and joining a women’s peace network. Much of the way Monica understands her shift towards an activist identity is couched in her thoughts about self-perception. In what follows she tells an insightful story about her mother, wherein there is a semantic cleft between involvement or actual activism, and perceiving oneself as an activist:

*... I always describe myself as not being a political person and I would even now, and that's probably quite bizarre because I've just sat here and given you a whole range of strong political views and, and it's really interesting about self definition because um, like a really interesting thing happened to my mum. She joined Amnesty at the age of 52 or whatever and she decided to go to a meeting and she was absolutely terrified. And she went to this place and she couldn't find the door – the main door was locked – and she thought, 'how do I get in?' So she started walking around the building and there's this door and over the top it said 'activists'. And she said, 'oh that can't be the one.' [laughs] She's like, 'I'm not an*

*activist, I can't go through there, there's no way I can go through that door'. And the bizarre thing is that my mum's been quite political in her views and quite political in her actions, she actually started an incorporated association back in the early 80's and ran it for 20 years and actually was quite um, extremely political at a grass roots level, at a social level all her life. And yet she never saw it that way and then when she came to this activist door it's like, 'Oh no, I can't go through there, I'm not an activist'. [both laugh] And she went round and round the building and eventually she realized it was the only door and she had to go through it and it was like so scary for her. And she rang me up and she said, 'I went through the 'activists' door'. And it was like this huge step and she could never go back, she'd gone through the activist door and she'd defined herself as an activist – after all those years, twenty five, thirty years of social activism.*

For Monica, one of the defining moments in her process of embracing an activist identity was not walking through the activists' door, but learning to carry a sign at a rally:

*I had never went to a rally until I was **well** into my 20s and I just thought [whisper] 'I'm not that kinda person', you know, I care **really** strongly about this issue, but 'I'm not a rally going person'. And eventually I went to my first rally – and then it was ages [before attending another] – and I never carried a sign or a banner, and I thought I'm just not a sign carrying person, I can go to a rally, I can cope with that, but I'm just not that kind of person, other people do that, you know like activists do that, not me. [...] I would go to rallies and I would walk, but other people, you know, people, people who knew things carried signs, people who were politically involved carried signs and they obviously knew a lot more than me and they belong to groups or whatever, I don't quite know what but something about them was just different from me that just put me categorically into the non-sign carrying thing [laughs]. [...] And then um, the Iraq war started and I felt **so strongly about it**, and I'm like, 'I'm gonna make a sign'. And **I carried** it and it was the first time in my life, and it was so scary and it was like, once I'd done it once it became so normal*



*and then it's like it's no issue at all and I do it all the time now, and I stand on parliament [steps] every month with [women's protest group] and hold up a sign and it's just become quite normal, but it took me 30 years to get to the point where I could actually see myself as a sign carrying kind of a person [laughs], and until I could see myself that way I couldn't do it. [...] Its about a self-definition, how you view yourself.*

Unlike some of the other participants (John, Indi, or Gillian), claiming an activist identity for Monica was no easy feat. It meant a significant shift in the way she perceived herself. Through the very acts of activism – attending rallies, making and carrying signs – Monica learnt that people who made and carried signs were not intrinsically different from herself; they did not necessarily possess any specific knowledge or insight she did not; nor were they necessarily part of activist groups. Unlike Monica however, they had felt able to make and carry signs. For Monica to do this she had to change the way she thought of herself, and hence begin the process that lead her to embracing an activist identity.

The way Monica initially conceptualizes activists, recalls the essentialist (Romantic) notion that great artists are born, not made; that to be an activist, as to be an artist, is something that cannot be learnt. As Monica says, she viewed herself as “categorically” not in the sign carrying/activist group; they were “different”, somehow they knew things she did not, and at least at this point she did not entertain the idea that all she had to do was learn how to be an activist. In fact, for Monica there was more involved than simply learning how to be an activist, she had to change her perception of herself.

Now that she sees herself as an activist, Monica thinks any involvement a person takes that pulls them out of “the nothingness of personal life” constitutes an important political step:

*And so if people break that and actually get out and go to a meeting or go to a rally, you may not have done much in changing the world, but you've done a lot in breaking out of that um, of that state. And I don't think it's personal, and I think that the problem is that people think it's personal, they think it's them, they think something's wrong with them and I actually think it's political, and I think if you break out of it and go to a meeting or go to a rally or get involved in any way shape or form you've already done a big step um, politically.*

Monica believes it important that those who can protest do. She remains somewhat sceptical and aware that her protest does not have immediate affects, but is steadfast about the import of dissent and protest:

*I think I go [to rallies and protests] a lot more regularly because I feel as um, if it matters ... I feel more empowered, I guess that's the only explanation. Um, before I probably felt like 'well, does it really make any difference if little old me goes or not?' ... Um, whereas now most of the time I go. It's like, 'well someone's gotta do it and I'm a person who had crossed that boundary of self-definition and reached a point where I can do it and I will do it, so I gotta do it. Because you know, it does matter that someone does it, and it you know, it matters that we do everything we can and um.*

In illustrating the importance she places on dissent, Monica talks about a rally she attended protesting the massacre in Fallujah, Iraq:

*Nathan: Like that's something you really believe in, just getting out there in the street?*

*Monica: Yep, firstly you're just overcoming that huge, subtle politics of powerlessness, and it's just, you are achieving something, it might not*

*be that much um. Like yesterday we protested about Fallujah and there must have been about 12 of us and it looked really pathetic, **but at least someone protested**, and at least it showed that um. Otherwise it just looks like the whole of Adelaide just accepted it and it was quite acceptable and quite fine and wasn't even something worth commenting about. At least this way it **showed that there was dissent**. Um, might not have been very strong, but you know that if those 12 people are there you know, there's 12 000 that agree that are not there, so. It's just that thing of raising your voice and just notching up and saying well I'm gonna stand up and be one person for dissent, I guess that's it.*

Monica's views about the importance of protest and dissent as a symbolic force, contrast sharply with Helen or Heidi, who viewed protest meaningful only when it had a direct and immediate affect or involved the mobilisation of large numbers of people. Daniel broadly reflects Monica's position; when talking about attending an anti-Iraq-war protest he says, "It was good feeling that there are other people that agree with you [...] I just wanted to get out there and voice my opinion that it was crap." For Monica it is of little consequence that rallies and protests generally do not invoke an immediate party political or governmental response. While of course she protests in the hope that things will change, she also protests: as a symbolic gesture, to show that she and others will not stand by in the face of injustice; to be part of something positive (her women's network for peace); as part of a micro politics that works to spread information typically not found in the mass media; and to foster discussion and questioning.

Notwithstanding Monica's division between capital and small 'p' politics, she maintains a broad definition of politics:

*Nathan: ... Um, this is um, changing gear a bit, but can you tell me what politics means to you?*

*Monica: ... Um, everything from um, the political system we've got, you know, as a group of us at a rally yesterday were saying we need a more participatory democracy; we need better structures; we need accountability of the prime minister that he can't take us to war without agreement from even parliament for God's sake, much less the people. Um, so that kind of um, structural politics and then there's the personal politics of personal space and personal relationships, um whether I wear makeup or not is political and it's an ongoing thing, you know everyday I have to wonder [laughs], yeah I have to decide, that's political. Um, you know, international stuff about money and food and poverty that's all politics as well.*

The bedrock of Monica's ethico-political practice is her vegetarianism:

*...we [Monica and her husband] kind of um, see vegetarianism as one of the most important political involvements that we can have, because it's got really huge environmental um, links, and it's got really huge um, social links and links around world politics and world food and why people are starving when there's actually, you know, possible to feed everybody. Um, so it's got like heaps of political and environmental ramifications, and so it's kind of like, 'Well which way do you go? Do you fight for the environment or do you fight for people?' And it's like, you can do both at once. It's one of the most basic things that has to be fixed before we can really move ahead with a lot of issues, in our opinion so.*

Not only is vegetarianism an avenue to work on a whole range of issues Monica is concerned about, it is also a form of political practice that deeply implicates one's 'private' life and daily practice. While Monica is not overly familiar with the catch cry 'the personal is political', she certainly embraces its ethos. When talking about the practice of vegetarianism and its political implications she says:

*Yeah and it's also something that you can, that every person can do, like it's not something really abstract and out there, and like, 'Well I'm not a politician, no*

*one's gonna listen to me'. Um, where as it's something where you can say, 'Well, I can't control what everyone else is doing, but I'm doing my bit; every single day I'm actually, you know, moving towards a more sustainable lifestyle and blah di blah, so yeah. [...] ... What you change in your personal life or what you do in your personal life has an impact politically I think, and is a political action. And that's where our vegetarianism kind of fits in 'cos like what people actually do with their diet actually is a political act and can have an affect.*

A further example of the way Monica connects one's private life with public and political ramifications can be seen in her ideas about personal behaviour:

*I'm also a strong believer in the macrocosm/microcosm type thing where if people can't have peaceful relationships within their own homes and families or their own workplaces, how can we possibly avoid war? And it sounds like a big simplification, but it's not really because if you know, if people don't have basic skills even in daily life how can nations have the skills to negotiate difficult, you know what I mean – I think it's really true.*

Again we see her implicating herself and her daily life with political meaning. If Monica's vegetarianism is as she says, an everyday attempt at moving towards a more environmentally and socially sustainable world, then her attempts at achieving peaceful relationships within her family and everyday dealings is part of moving away from a world where war and violence is used to resolve conflicts and towards a more peaceful world.

This discussion highlights Monica's broad understanding and practice of politics. It shows that she does not believe in the classic liberal divide between public/political and private/non-political. For Monica, politics surrounds and informs people's thoughts and actions. She thinks it has an influence on intimate relationships and, importantly, it can enter such relationships through information or specific action, like responding to domestic violence in empowered ways. If there is such a thing as a private/non-political sphere, which Monica herself questions when she says, "I don't think there is any human relationships without politics", it is most definitely a very permeable and malleable

private/non-political sphere, one constantly in interaction with the public/political sphere. Monica sees herself as an activist, as someone with political agency. She understands her life as being couched within broader socio-political structures and practices, structures and practices *she* can have an affect on through her own actions, be they on the steps of parliament, when she does her banking or sitting down to dinner.

### *Patrick*

Patrick is not a member of a political or activist group, nor does he regularly volunteer his time for any organization; by most quantitative measures he would be rendered disengaged from politics. He is, however, a keen follower of mainstream politics and current events. Moreover, like Monica, Patrick understands himself to be implicated in the social-political processes and structures around him. As such, he feels he can have some kind of effect on the world through his daily practices and choices. Patrick has a broad understanding of politics and views politics as ubiquitous:

*I dunno, everything's fairly political these days; um politics is kind of in everything, from the you know, the clothes you wear and the food you eat to the self that you portray to the rest of the world sort of saying something politically and in everything that you do, and even not making a statement is making a statement in a way. ... Politics...goes far, far beyond people in suits voting and yelling at each other. ... That's what I mean about politics, it's just everywhere you know; um, it's a political choice as to what I would order for lunch, you know.*

Patrick's last comment refers to his vegetarianism; he thinks in our society meat is a luxury and cannot justify why an animal should die when he can easily eat something else. For Patrick, being vegetarian is also about choosing not to support an industry he disagrees with. He says the meat industry is "an industry I don't want my money going to, it's not something I want to fund/support." The idea of scrutinising one's purchases in relation to one's political views is something Patrick takes seriously. He chooses not to purchase products from companies like Nike or custom McDonalds because he "disagrees with the philosophies behind [them]." He tries to minimise his use of petrol by using public transport, he avoids processed food and shops for organic food and wine, free-range eggs, and locally produced goods from small businesses. He supports local music and avoids pubs with poker machines primarily because of the dramatic negative

affect their introduction has had upon live music venues. Like most participants, Patrick is also a keen recycler of his domestic waste.

Given Patrick views his self and his daily practices as political, he interprets his actions within a political context.

*...I have an obligation to not um, be part of the problem. You know, like you look at sort of issues like immigration and people have got, you know, are basically in concentration camps; you have an obligation to not do nothing, like to be a part of the problem basically by agreeing with it, saying, 'oh it's just the way it goes'.*

Here Patrick is effectively extending resistance or protest of something like mandatory detention of asylum seekers to include speaking out against it. He argues that silence or complicity makes one “part of the problem”, and that by speaking out against such practices one is resisting. In Patrick’s schema there is no divide between public and private, his actions and choices can always be read with a broader political context in mind. Importantly, Patrick sees such micro resistance as a starting point, which could be furthered by other forms of protest, like rallies and so forth. Indeed, he talks about the sorts of volunteer/activist work he wants to do in this area.

It is informative to think through the implications of Patrick’s sense of politics by contrasting it with someone like Philip. While there is no doubt overlap between how these young men understand politics,<sup>60</sup> there is a significant difference in the way they position themselves in relation to politics. Philip, as discussed later in the chapter, understands himself as inactive, his political practice is characterised by what he sees as a lack of action, commitment, and passion. In contrast, Patrick is aware that he is not part of institutionalised groups working on social/political issues and could do more, but he still locates himself within a political realm, as a political being whose actions and decisions have political affects. This position empowers Patrick and allows him to see the ways in which he can politicise his daily life, while Philip is left with a dominating sense of impotence, thinking he does little to further the causes he believes in, and in turn feeling like he lacks the conviction, commitment or passion of those that do act.

Philip thought joining a group would mean compromising his beliefs and, perhaps more fundamentally, that he would prefer to be an external commentator or analyst of politics. Patrick’s position is of course compatible with this, as the site of political practice shifts to include the self. Thus, if Philip was to take up a similar position, politicising his daily life and self, he would not need to compromise his views in turn for collective action, and it would mean he could interpret his daily life as holding political significance, transforming his sense of political impotence.

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<sup>60</sup> In fact, Philip and Patrick probably share quite similar political views.

Patrick describes this well when he says:

*I dunno, I guess it's just the way the world works, people can kind of remove themselves from it and say, 'Oh there's nothing I can do about it', you know. I mean, you know, wearing their Nike shoes and saying there's nothing they can do about you know, slavery and child [labour]; you know, children with hunches in their backs, you know...<sup>61</sup>*

Patrick is of course exaggerating for effect, but his point remains, we have many opportunities to practice our political beliefs; individuals can do something about sweat-shop labour, they can choose not to purchase products made under such conditions, they can promote awareness of the issue among family and friends. Patrick begins to show us the myriad new ways in which politics or the 'public' sphere is penetrating our daily lives. He suggests the opportunities for politicising one's self and beginning a daily political practice, while Philip on the other hand is bound with feelings of doubt, confusion and impotence.

### ***Nicola***

Nicola is one of the few women in this study who openly identifies as a feminist. Reflecting her feminist approach is her rejection of the hegemonic division between public-political and private-non-political. This can be seen in Nicola's broad definition of politics:

*... if you believe, as I do, that everything is political, yeah absolutely, what I do is political. I don't sit there thinking you know, I'm politiking [laughs], but yeah absolutely, it's influencing something else or someone else and therefore it's having an impact on [the] social and political.*

Her capacious definition also fits with her broad understanding of activism, where she stretches activism to include acts that might be considered 'private', like mediating for family or friends. Nicola thinks that activism and feminism overlap and that while the issues may vary, feminists are activists.

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<sup>61</sup> These comments are also much like those made by Chris when he says there's something you can do about everything.



Recalling Monica's idea that breaking out of the nothingness of personal life is a political act in itself, Nicola does not view being publicly active as a feminist a defining feature:

*So for example, um, my definition of feminism is a person that believes in equality and a person that understands you know, patriarchy. And um, doesn't necessarily have to be a person that is you know, politically or socially active but essentially believes in those principals – I mean um, if they are active then all the better. [...] I think that thinking is you know, half the battle, that in fact um, you know – because your thinking influences your behaviour – maybe you might not choose to do anything about it at that time, but in many ways it's shaping the way you think, your ideology, your paradigm, all that sort of stuff. So it will influence the way that you see your world. So um, yeah I think activism – definitely a large component of that is the way you **think**.*

Of course, this position begs the question, is there a difference between a feminist who acts and one who does not?

*... I think that they're both feminists it's just that one chooses to act in a certain way that it may be in the public sphere and other people do it in their private sphere, which is between their ears, um, but it doesn't make one less a feminist just because they're not out there actively doing stuff.*

Nicola's understanding of politics, activism, and feminism paves the way for a politicisation of everything and a complete dissolution of any public-political/private-non-political divide. Having dispensed with the public/private divide, Nicola's political map finds politics potentially everywhere and in everything.

### ***Kate***

While Kate is involved with mainstream hegemonic politics, as a member of a political party and an employee of a state Member of Parliament (MP), she understands politics as an intrinsic part of herself, meaning she practices politics not only at work or at party meetings, but at home, in the kind of language she uses, in the very way she understands herself.

Kate's politicisation began with her family who are staunch Labor Party supporters:

*...my dad was a **huge** Paul Keating fan, just, you know, just always loved him, loved his wit, um talk, spoke about him a lot, and um, yes we just always, I mean I don't remember specific conversations, but I'm sure that we always mentioned politics and they always mentioned how much they loved the Labor Party and that sort of thing [laughing]. And mum and my aunty would tell stories about the [Whitlam] dismissal and that sort of thing, like they were always out rallying you know, all that kind of thing. My Nan once didn't, no my aunty, was with my Nan at Myers or John Martins or somewhere like that and wouldn't get served 'cos she wore a 'Shame Fraser, Shame' badge during the dismissal and all that sort of thing [laughing]. ... but yeah I'd suppose the general home environment was political. Um, but not overtly, like, just it was part of our lives.*

Given this home environment, where politics was part of the furniture, Kate talks about politics as something intrinsic to herself, as something to be discovered within oneself:

*Nathan: ... do you think um, that involvement [in party politics] has changed you as a person?*

*Kate: ... well its probably brought out things, like ideas that were somewhere in, in me... yeah like its, I mean awakened my um, you know, my political awareness...*

Talking about her life more generally, Kate makes similar remarks about her helping and advocacy ethic:

*I-I reckon, yeah I don't think I ever made a conscious decision that that's what my quest in life has to be, to help other people, but I think it's all just part of, um, my upbringing...*

Letter writing is an example of Kate's political practice and highlights her individual effort and more broadly her political philosophy. The following comments were made in response to a question about writing to an MP or a company about an issue:

*Yeah I, I liken myself to Grandpa Simpson sometimes. I'm looking forward to being an old person who just writes letters of complaints all the time. ... have you seen that movie ... Goodbye Lenin? ... the mother in that um, just writes, I think she describes it as you know, playing her small part in righting small injustices in the world, and you go well ... Like some things you experience or witness are completely you know, fucked [laughs] really and I, ... if you are, if you get incensed by something why not do something about it? ... So that's my big thing, is yeah, righting small injustices in my own little way [laughs].*

Righting small injustices, in her own little way, encapsulates much of Kate's political orientation. We can see how clearly she implicates herself and any agency she may have in a given situation. Such a guiding principal operates in daily life as comfortably as it does within an institution like a political party, where one's participation can be understood as part of a broader process of righting injustices.

At a conceptual level, Kate has a broad understanding of politics. She emphasises the connections between political understanding and daily life:

*Politics, um to me means a kind of awareness, a conscious awareness of um, a philosophy about the way that society is organized or societ-you know, um, or operates. ... yeah so politics is kind of having an, an understanding of social issues and ethical issues and environmental issues and all that sort of thing um, but organize, I think each individual then organizes them into their own kind of um, ah, like belief system and then **that** impacts on the way that they conduct their lives um, you know on sort of micro and bigger levels...*

What is clear from her definition of politics is that politics is firstly about knowledge and understanding, and secondly that each individual then incorporates their understanding into a belief system, which she says then impacts on the way they conduct their lives. Obviously politics is a very personal and individual matter and something that has direct bearing upon how one lives one's life. Politics is not an abstract set of ideas or

philosophies which help us understand society or achieve particular ends, but beliefs which each individual is invested in and deploys in daily life.

Kate goes on to broaden her notion of politics more explicitly:

*'Cos I don't, I spose the thing that I think is that politics isn't just about being a member of a political party which is part of the parliamentary system um, ... and it's not just the organized kind of, um, yeah parliamentary or bureaucratic structure of public services, it's everything really, like you, you know, raise the issue of consumer choices and all that sort of thing.*

The reason politics is everything, and the reason this has any meaning is because Kate implicates herself in her political views. If politics was only something that she did when she went to political party meetings it would have a beginning and an end; political issues may be all around us, but they would have a specific, finite, and proper place in which they are to be dealt with.

Kate's family background, which was imbued with politics, has meant that her political involvement feels "natural". She works from a basis where people are intrinsically political (*zōon politikon*). Where political involvement, rather than initiating politicisation, draws out political views already held. Following this understanding, Kate sees herself as a person with inherent political views and agency, able to affect change through action in the 'public' sphere, but also 'private' acts like the language she uses and the way she relates to people.

### ***John***

Like Kate, John is a member of a political party and active within party politics. John describes himself as an activist and has been involved with numerous forms of activism, including rallies, protests, the use of signs, posters and stickers, and some consumer activism. John takes shorter showers for environmental reasons, and similarly is very conscious of the amount of energy he uses. Thus, there are a number of ways John

embodies his political views and practices them in his daily life. A further example of the way John's politics undermines the public/private divide can be seen in the following excerpt:

*When I first got to college, one of the events [a bonding type of activity] we have is where we all get pissed at the beach, we all line up and all the first year's skull [beer] and then all the second year's skull [beer]. And when we first got there, my first year, it was like, 'All first years take it up the arse!' And screaming shit like that. And I'm happy that in the time that I've been there [as a tutor], we've been able to convince people that, 'Why do you need to say that, it makes people uncomfortable?', you know, and just change the culture a bit. So that now we still do the skull and you know, cheer at each other and have the rivalry between the first year's and the second years, but now people don't have to skull beer, they can skull water if they want. And this isn't my doing by any means this is what we've done as a tutor group. ... And we don't shout homophobic chants anymore. Well I see that as homophobic, but obviously most people at college didn't. But at least we we're able to convince them that even if you don't agree that that's being homophobic it's still inappropriate. And we were able to do that, and we've been able to do that and that's why I get involved in things because you can achieve shit like that.*

This is a good example of practical change and something John is proud of. On the surface, such change may be simply about changing behaviour, but it can also be about changing oneself, the way one treats others and considering how one's behaviour affects others. In many ways this kind of change can be located within feminist ideas of the personal is political, where (in this example), the language one uses becomes political. In an example such as this, John's self, his daily practices, indeed the language he uses, is clearly enmeshed with his political views.

### **Mark**

Mark is also involved with party and student politics, and while he largely adheres to the mainstream hegemonic understanding of politics discussed in Chapter Six, there were several points during his interview where he conceives of politics as not resting entirely on a public/private divide. The first example arose out of questions about the feminist mantra 'the personal is political':

*... you can't use the argument that there needs to be a separation between the personal and political to then allow gender bias or whatever; for women to be marginalized by men or whatever and just to say, 'Well you know, [laughing] it's personal choice what people do in their life, it's up to them.'*

Clearly any divide Mark maintains between the 'public' and 'private' is a malleable, permeable divide. A further example of the way in which the 'private' may impact on the 'public' and political occurred later in the interview. Mark 'outed' himself to me and explained that "Um, well, I mean, I am um, you know, gay myself, but not openly; I'm sort of a bit more closeted you know, about it..." He goes on to say that his gayness, despite not being 'out',<sup>62</sup> provides him with some insight into the prejudice and injustice that some people face:

*Nathan: Um, do you think that, on a general level, people's sexual orientation or identity is a political issue?*

*Mark: Yeah, I think, I think it can, I think it can make you look at issues differently. You know, for myself I suppose it sort of made me more interested in um, social justice issues and that sort of thing, so yeah I think it can, can make you look at issues in a different way.*

*Nathan: Can you talk a little bit about how it's made you rethink social justice issues?*

*Mark: Um, I'm in, in terms of, um sort of you know, seeing how, a lot of those, like I'm not the sort of person who's very open about this so I haven't faced a lot of you know, discrimination or whatever myself, like I don't, you know a lot of my close friends and whatever don't um, don't know, so I've yeah, I've kept that, quiet, so I haven't faced problems in terms of that but it has made me you know, realise*

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<sup>62</sup> As discussed in Chapter Five, 'out' remains a problematic term as clearly no one is ever completely out of the closet, coming out must instead be regarded as an ongoing process, something which is never complete.

*potentially the problems that you know, could be, could be faced – I suppose some of the reasons for me not to be honest about it yeah, led me to appreciate that.*

What Mark demonstrates here is the ability to apply the discrimination he could face when he comes 'out', to other forms of social discrimination. And this is clearly an example where Mark, his private world and desires, are deeply implicated in his political views; here we see politics and some of the most private aspects of self intersect.

### *A relational, interconnected self*

Underlying the political understandings and practices of Monica, Patrick, Nicola, Kate, John, and Mark is the Durkheimian (1984) insight that in modernity individuals are increasingly interconnected. As globalisation, in all its facets – trade, travel, communications technology, the global and instantaneous media – increases, it can also be said that the world and its people are increasingly, and in increasingly complex ways, interconnected. William Connolly made this point when he said, “Exactly what late modern life renders inescapable is the intensive entanglement of everyone with everyone else” (1991, p. 188). Monica, Patrick, Nicola, Kate, John, and Mark see themselves as implicated in the world around them, their presence in the world has real consequences.<sup>63</sup> With this awareness, these participants interpret their actions, from shopping to language use to sexuality to thinking about issues like feminism, as having real affects in the world. In Sheller and Urry’s words, “Awareness of the interconnectedness of the world forces an expansion of private horizons to peoples and places remote in time and space” (2003, p. 118). If we interpret our actions as having real affects on the world, on people’s wages and conditions, the welfare of animals, farming practices, the environment and so on, very few actions remain discrete and ‘private’. This insight has indeed been quickly taken up by many contemporary activist groups including, anti-roads and anti-World Trade Organization activists, fair trade initiatives focussing on coffee (Levi and Linton, 2003) and clothing, and consumer campaigns against particular brands (Bennett, *forthcoming*).

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<sup>63</sup> Indeed, research has found political consumers to score high on feelings of political efficacy (Stolle and Micheletti, 2003).

That Monica, Patrick, Nicola, Kate, John, and Mark locate themselves within interconnected global networks means their sense of self stands in stark contrast to that of liberalism's discrete, individualised and atomised self. Chapter Five provided one example of how participants eschewed a Romantic, atomised self in favour of a relational, interconnected self with Monica, Indi, and Mark outing themselves during the interview and aligning themselves with communities of others – activists, sex-workers, homosexuals, queers. Similarly, several participants have spoken about how pleased they were to be in community with others who felt the same as them – Daniel made such comments about attending an anti-Iraq-war protest and numerous other participants made similar comments about their activist, friendship, or political group. In the previous chapter we saw that the way Paul spoke about his political views and the value he places on friendship contrasts sharply with the classical liberal model of self and how it should relate to politics. In fact, during the interview, Paul asked to speak without being recorded and told of a secret meeting of socially progressive liberals, and the importance this had in terms of his sense that others, senior members of his political party, shared his views and that it was worth continuing to fight within the party for a socially progressive brand of liberalism.

Beyond these examples, many participants talked about the role that their family played in nurturing and developing their political views. The importance of Kate's family was noted above, but numerous participants spoke of how they had regular political/social discussions with their family (Hannah's inaugural membership of a political party was paid by her father). While participants may not share their parents' political views they were nonetheless important teachers and interlocutors. Friendships were also important for participants, with many commenting on the importance of friends in their politicisation, and joining (and remaining in) political parties or groups.

Many participants also spoke of how life experiences have shaped their political views and commitments. For some, this occurred through university, travel, or employment, experiencing racism, sexism or homophobia, and for others it occurred through living arrangements.



All this indicates that for these participants, their political views and practices are a product of family and friendships, developing over time and through significant life experiences. Their political views and commitments have taken shape over the years in a manner which reflects a permeable ‘public’/‘private’ divide, where ‘private’ experiences do come to bear upon political views and ‘public’/‘political’ practices, similarly ‘public’/‘political’ experiences impact on the ‘private’ realm, one’s interests, understanding and actions. Thus, not only do Monica, Patrick, Nicola, Kate, John, and Mark locate themselves within global interconnected networks, but almost all participants posit a notion of self which is much more relational and interconnected than liberal/Romantic notions of a pre-existing, atomised, discrete self.

The table below provides an overview and quick reference point for how participants are placed in relation to a number of categories. Tables such as this are a crude way of capturing the vicissitudes and subtleties of people’s complex relationship with the political. However, it does give the reader a broad overview of how participants have been characterised by this research and some of the political involvements they have undertaken. Of course, some aspects of political repertoire have been left out and the categories do not do justice to the richness of participants’ relationship with the political. I hope that this richness has been done some level of service by this and the previous chapters of analysis.

Two participants have not been marked as presenting a Relational/Interconnected Self, Peter and Helen. For Peter, this is explained by his conservative liberalism, which as we have seen forecloses his ability to join up private and public-political and hence view his private actions as having political meaning and consequences for the world. Beyond this, he understands his political interest to have been nurtured by a family environment where politics featured regularly. Clearly he does present an element of a relational self, but his brand of liberalism, which holds steadfast to a public/private split, cannot possibly furnish him with the sense that his self is enmeshed in the flows and processes that produce the life he leads and the world around him – we noted his emphasis on personal

responsibility in Chapter Six. Politics is something Peter enters the public sphere to 'do', and as such any sense of interconnection he feels must, following this logic, have its end at the beginning of his private sphere.

Helen on the other hand, has little time for politics. She uses her father as an occasional resource for information about issues she has little knowledge of. Again, there is an element of a relational self, and Helen does undertake some recycling and energy and water conservation in her home, but fundamentally she does not understand herself or her actions as being important in terms of environmentalism, working toward sustainability and so on. She says that the water and energy conservation is something her father pushes at home, and admits it is done in part to save money. Helen does not present herself as a woman who is politically empowered by the choices she makes in her life which contribute to the sort of world she wants to see.

Those participants marked with a ♦ (Paul, Hannah, Mark, and Heidi) do not display a Relational/Interconnected Self. As discussed in the previous two chapters they show real ambivalence about maintaining a public/private split. Whilst wanting to maintain a public/private split, Paul talks openly about the importance of friendships for his political commitments and describes his political views as constitutive of his self rather than mere attributes he has. Hannah undertakes *activism*, but her hegemonic understanding of politics and her textual conception of feminism, close the door on her politicising her self rather than simply the things she does. To some degree Mark shares Paul's problem in that he wants to maintain some kind of public/private divide and yet he knows that private matters like sexuality do have public/political affects. Heidi on the other hand, reverses Paul and Mark's dilemma by trying to establish a public/private divide, as she knows her very identity and corporeality as a woman of Aboriginal and Chinese decent can pull her out of a private context without her consent/control.

Other participants who have been marked as presenting a Relational/Interconnected Self, may not be the empowered activists and party members described above, but they nonetheless understand themselves as enmeshed in the social worlds around them. Daniel

for example, as will be discussed below, is decidedly disillusioned and disengaged from formal participation in politics, but he feels he *must* keep up-to-date with politics and current events, studies politics, seeks out political satire and regularly discusses politics with his friends and family. Philip is also not formally involved with politics, but he is a vegetarian, political consumer, and politics features heavily in his social and familial life. Mary too is not formally involved with politics, and she too now feels it is important to stay informed and discuss politics. Mary takes her consumption quite seriously and feels she should not do things she cannot justify, like spend more than one hundred dollars on a pair of shoes when others don't have money for basic necessities like food.

Participants	Political Party	Activist Groups	Women's Groups	Relational/ Interconnected Self	Identify as Feminist	Identify as Activist
Paul	☐			◆		
Hannah	☐	☐	☐	◆		
Peter	☐					
Mark	☐	☐		◆		
John	☐	☐		☐		☐
Chris	☐			☐		
Kate	☐			☐		
Indigo		☐		☐		☐
Monica		☐	☐	☐		☐
Gillian		☐	☐	☐		
Nicola			☐	☐	☐	☐
Heidi		☐		◆		
Rebecca				☐		
Helen						
Daniel				☐		
Patrick				☐	☐	
Philip				☐		
Mary				☐	☐	

### Disengagement Through Cynicism: Critical Disengagement

A further element of participants practicing polysemic politics connects with the idea of active disengagement or disengagement through cynicism, discussed in Chapter Three. Numerous participants talked about their frustration, anger and cynicism for mainstream

hegemonic party politics. Helen and Indi spoke about their frustrations and interpretation of politics and politicians:

*Um, even just watching them [politicians] on TV drives me mad, they just get off the topic, it's you know, it's all a bit theatrical; I basically have to switch the channel when they start carrying on [laughs]. (Helen)*

*Nathan: This is a bit of a general question, but can you tell me what politics means to you?*

*Indi: Ugly fat blokes with glasses crapping on about how they don't like gay marriages. And you know very, you know Johnnie's [John Howard] a very down straight the line, he doesn't like to look out and see what it's really like in this world – I think he's too good for this little house [used as a brothel] I dunno [laughing], he doesn't really see too much outside anyway, so... Politics just seems like something that no one will ever agree with and it's just very depressing, what people get away with that are in politics as well. So yeah, I'm very down on it because I don't understand it, and yes feel like a person that can't really help do much. You might vote, cool, but you're only a little number [laughs], that's how I think. ... You don't really know, because... I might vote but I don't know what I'm votin' for ... When I vote I don't really think about it too much, but I do vote.*

In many ways it is not surprising that for a woman like Indi who did not finish high school, moved into an illicit industry and then gradually embraced a very marginalised and deviant identity and politics, orthodox politics seems to offer her life little. This is not to suggest Indi is disconnected from the world around her. She is a regular news watcher and enjoys the sorts of social and political issues covered on the ABC's youth radio station Triple J. Nor is it to suggest that Indi thinks mainstream politics is irrelevant to her life:

*Nathan: Do you care about politics?*

*Indi: Yeah, because it affects us even though I don't think my vote really counts and stuff, but it does affect us, our daily lives. Like I've worked in an illegal industry for 5 years, it'll be great when I move [interstate] because I can work legally as a sole*

*operator. And so politics is important because, yeah it affects my day to day. It affects if I'm gonna get the vice on my door, slamming in the door on a daily basis or I'm never gonna see them for 4 years. So yeah, it is important.*

These excerpts also highlight how distant, and in Indi's case powerless, Helen and Indi feel from mainstream politics and politicians.

Rebecca also articulates her cynicism and contempt for mainstream politics very clearly. She has had some experience of orthodox politics through her involvement with student politics, something she remains very disdainful of, "student politics is a joke [laughs]" she says. A further dimension to Rebecca's contempt for student politics can be seen in the way her blackness was used to define and confine her politics. When Rebecca got involved with student politics, it was suggested that being indigenous she should run as indigenous liaison officer, something she felt defined and restricted her involvement and political platform:

*Um, like I don't think just because I'm indigenous that I have now some passion for indigenous issues, like sometimes you get sort of boxed into, 'you're Aboriginal, you're Torres Strait Islander, therefore that's what you do', that's what you're going to do. Um, I just think it's an important issue that everyone should be concerned about ... When I started with; tried to do some work with [her student's association] it's just like, 'well you're the, you know, you're indigenous therefore you can run as indigenous liaison officer', where ... whereas ... you've got interests that are beyond ... you know, if you're a lesbian or whatever like ... your main area's gonna be in you know, gay rights or whatever like that. You know, you're beyond [just your sexuality] ... it's [important] just because these are important, well I think they're important issues.*

What Rebecca is driving at is that one should not be defined or "boxed into" political positions because of one's subject identity. She feels that issues like indigenous health and education are important in themselves and warrant general concern, not just that of indigenous Australians or those directly affected. In fact, she makes a very Foucauldian

point, that one should transcend one's identity, transgress one's limits, and not be defined by labels like 'homosexual', 'Aboriginal' and so on (see Simons, 1995).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given her views on student politics, Rebecca is also disillusioned by state and federal politics:

*Nathan: ... What do you, what do you think of when someone says, 'oh, yeah, politics,' or 'that's political'?*

*Rebecca: Okay um, I suppose the first thing when you hear about politics you just do the groan thing because you just think that it's um, I dunno the stereotype of politicians that you know, don't actually do anything for the community, it's all about doing stuff for their own political party, their own things like that. I dunno, you just, you get a bit cynical because you just think politicians are just puppets of you know, businessmen and stuff like that, it's what you think of when you think of [George] Bush [Junior]...*

In Rebecca's view state and federal politicians are as self-serving and disconnected from the people they are there to serve as student politicians. In effect what we see is a reality gap, between what Rebecca thinks politics *could* and *can be* and what she thinks it *is*, based on her own experiences of student politics and her perceptions of state and federal politics. Here, Rebecca reflects the findings of researchers like Harris (2001; Harris and Bulbeck, forthcoming), who have found that young people are cynical (even apathetic) as a *result* of their engagement and experience of politics (see also Bhavnani, 1991; Matthews et al. 1998/9).

Daniel is similarly cynical about mainstream hegemonic politics, and while his cynicism does reflect a level of engagement and critique of dominant politics, he has not had the same level of involvement as Rebecca. Daniel has transformed his heavy drinking and anarchist days into a more sober university student life, which he is quite happy with, yet he still feels very disenfranchised and cynical about politics. He attended his first rally in 2003, protesting the war in Iraq. He says:

*It was good feeling that there are other people that agree with you. ... I guess in a way it kind of proved that democracy doesn't work [laughs]. Yeah, it sort of like justified in a way everything I've been saying for years.*

Daniel says he was not surprised that the rally had no immediate affect, “I just wanted to get out there and voice my opinion that it was crap.”

A further example of Daniel’s disenfranchisement came up during a discussion of censorship. Daniel takes the liberal view that adults can decide for themselves what they want to see, read, hear, et cetera. Commenting on the way censorship works in Australia, he says, “It just seems like the way I feel is getting ignored, I guess.”

Daniel also has a cynical view of orthodox politics. Much like Peter, he says politics is about the party that can offer the public the most in return for their vote; he thinks it is much like big business.<sup>64</sup> Daniel says he has little faith in larger political parties, as he thinks politicians are not held to account enough and that they are more concerned with re-election than making change. Daniel thinks the scale of government plays a part in one’s ability to create change; change is possible at a council level, but not at a state or federal level.

Daniel holds out little hope for activists. He says he admires them and that their work is important, but is unconvinced about how much difference they actually make. He says he would not like to be an activist as he is too cynical and cannot see the opportunities for change.

When asked if he feels disenfranchised, Daniel replies:

*Yeah I really do, I, I, I don’t believe that my vote actually makes a difference but I do it anyway; I think that’s kind of why the idea of student politics appeals to me because it’s on a smaller scale so you may actually be able to have, to make a difference, but I believe we’re really moving away from democracy and just becoming more – I don’t even know what they’ve termed it yet – but I reckon corporations have greater influence than the people do these days. So until people realise that their consuming power is actually gonna make a difference not much is gonna change. So yeah, I think disenfranchised is a good way of describing it.*

Clearly, Daniel holds out little hope for orthodox politics or activism, but he does keep the door of change ajar by suggesting a practice of politics through consumption. As an avid follower of mainstream politics and current events Daniel is far from the disengaged and possibly apathetic figure quantitative analysis would likely render him. His disengagement from politics rests on a deep-seated cynicism which arises from his experience and critique of mainstream politics.

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<sup>64</sup> He describes the appointment of Peter Garret to a safe Labor seat as one of the “show biz” pieces of politics.

Heidi, on the other hand, identifies quite different reasons for her lack of further social/political involvement. While she clearly identifies frustrations and a level of cynicism for mainstream politics, her ambiguity about political involvement reflects the experience of others around her.

*Nathan: Do you keep up with politics?*

*Heidi: Ahh yeah, I dunno I s'pose.*

*Nathan: You s'pose?*

*Heidi: Yeah current affairs and like the news and that kind of thing I would, yeah.*

*Nathan: Yep, so is it mainly through TV or do you read newspapers or the Internet?*

*Heidi: No um, newspapers and the Internet; I hate watching like, I hate watching the news on TV, it makes me mad. So [laughs] no I don't, but then again reading the newspaper makes me mad as well, so um. I'm trying to de-stress my life at the moment so I'm trying not to trigger [it].*

These comments about not wanting to get too caught up or distressed by news of the world are similar to Heidi's views about indigenous leadership and being involved with politics:

*Nathan: Would you say you care about politics?*

*Heidi: Ahh, sometimes I do, sometimes I don't. Sometimes, yeah sometimes you care about things and sometimes you wanna say, 'enough is enough', because you can get really stressed-out and you have to pick your fights 'cos you can fight over everything, yeah.*

*[...]*

*Heidi: Yeah it's a, it's a health issue, 'cos I don't wanna burnout, 'cos you see it happen to a lot of people, particularly a lot of Aboriginal people and I see like my dad you know, he's so stressed about things, and you know it translated into other things. Like Charlie Perkins died at, he's like 50 years old, of a heart attack ... Yeah, I don't wanna end up like that.*



Here we see very clearly Heidi's ambiguity about politics. She has an interest and commitment to social justice, but she does not want to sacrifice herself through the quest of attaining such a goal; she does not want her life consumed by politics.

Heidi is not entirely comfortable with all of the political dimensions to her life. One gets the impression she does not like having politics thrust upon her. Much like Rebecca, Heidi does not like it when people conflate her blackness with being political:

*... 'cos you know, people just assume because you're black you're political, or because you're black you know everything about black people.*

It was noted in the previous chapter that Heidi maintains a public-political/private-non-political divide, as seen in her understanding of activism. Perhaps part of Heidi's ambiguity around politics and her favouring a public/private divide can be explained by understanding how politics relates to *her*; politics is not always a choice for Heidi. As she says above, people regularly equate her blackness with being political. Heidi provides another example of politics being thrust into her life, this time directly affecting her sister. Heidi's sister was waiting first in line for a cash register when the shop assistant asked to serve the (white) woman behind her. The woman replied that Heidi's sister was first, but the shop assistant said she was going to serve the other woman first. Heidi says that this "happens more often than you think" and that she made her sister ring up and complain about the service.

Heidi flatly rejects the notion that blackness or aboriginality equals political or activist. She wants to be afforded the freedom of not being political if she chooses. Given that the choice to engage with politics is to some extent permanently beyond Heidi's control – as racism can at any point pull her into a political situation, in that she is thrust from being an individual in the 'private' sphere to being defined by her blackness/aboriginality and hence forced into the 'public' sphere – perhaps her conceptualisation of politics which so firmly upholds liberalism's public/private divide is a defence mechanism, something she aims at achieving to hold politics at arms length, giving her some control over it. This

interpretation of Heidi wanting to be able to have some control over politics in her life also fits with her concerns about how an all encompassing relationship with politics can affect one's health and wellbeing.<sup>65</sup>

Some of these participants may be disengaged from politics, but they are anything but apathetic. Their disengagement comes as a *result* of their actual physical engagements with politics, as student politicians, voters and citizens, and also through their conceptual and critical engagement with mainstream party politics. As a result, they may still be involved with particular forms of social/political activity, but they have largely turned their backs on the dominant form of politics they believe unworthy of their participation.

### **Reflexivity/Phronêsis**

A final feature of the polysemic political understanding and practice of participants in this study is closely related to what was described above as self as political, but specifically involves reflexivity and *phronêsis*. *Phronêsis*, sometimes called practical intelligence or wisdom, is the virtue that describes someone who knows how to exercise judgement in *particular* times and places. In stark contrast to modern conceptions of morality (typically of a Kantian origin) which are dominated by rules, Aristotle's ethics holds the virtues at its centre and *phronêsis* as a critical virtue, which develops with experience, allowing one to choose the right action in particular circumstances (see MacIntyre, 1981, esp pp. 137 – 153). Several participants have a political practice and understanding which shows high levels of reflexivity and resembles more a practice of ethics or *phronêsis* than the application of a set of political principals or rules to everyday life.

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<sup>65</sup> Interestingly, Heidi's very attempt at upholding the public/private divide, which is so dominant in our politics and culture, could also be a part of Heidi's political repertoire. As a black woman trying to maintain a public/private divide, Heidi could understand her efforts as attempting to claim for herself the privilege only afforded the dominant group; to be unmarked by 'race', gender or sexuality, to not be marked by difference and hence capable of residing within a 'private' sphere.

Philip, for example, thinks there is little consistency in the sorts of events and issues that interest him. He says he cannot locate himself in a particular group like ‘environmentalists’, “it’s just the topical issues at the time I think.” He goes on to say that he thinks his relatively privileged middle-class background means that there are not particular issues he wants to focus on:

*I guess I, I’ve been struggling with this [why he is not more politically involved] myself to be honest; and it’s, I guess that’s what it boils down to, I mean middle-class family, I haven’t had any massive trials and so I’m not particularly keen on one area – I’m interested in a broad range of things.*

Philip seems to yearn for a focus to his political interests, something he could get his “blood boiling” over:

*I’m envious of some people, how they can sort of really get involved in or passionate about I dunno, some conflict overseas or some famine or something like that.*

It is interesting to contrast Philip’s interpretation of his broad political interest as unfocused with the more positive interpretations other participants had of their broad interests. For example, Gillian and Monica were almost unable to isolate issues they were concerned about because they feel concerned about humanity, and also because they see issues as interconnected; Monica insisted that environmentalism is deeply connected with humanitarianism and our collective future – Lichterman has also noted this interpretation of “everything is related”, among some activists (1996, p. 215).

Another interpretation of Philip’s ‘unfocused politics’ is that it reflects the retreat of ideology<sup>66</sup> and the rise of reflexivity (Beck, 1992; Beck, Bonss and Lau, 2003; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2001, 1995). In line with Beck and Beck-Gernsheim’s individualization thesis, Philip reflects the way as individuals we are increasingly asked to take responsibility for our lives and the way we live – our political practice is no exception.

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<sup>66</sup> Perhaps with the exception of neo-conservatism.

Philip's politics is more about responding to the world and its events rather than applying a particular ideology or framework to interpret events. This parallels the notion proffered by Phillip Adams (2004) and others that politics, specifically left-wing politics, is more about feelings and moral sense rather than -isms. Philip has feelings and criticisms and views about world events like the war in Iraq, but these do not translate into arguments for sweeping changes to the structure of our society or culture. This form of ethico-political practice bears some resemblance to Aristotle's central virtue of *phronêsis*. The significance of this for Philip's political practice is not that he is a virtuous Aristotelian subject, but that his means of practicing politics is about *particularities*, judging events or ideas as he meets them and in terms of his sense of ethics/morality, rather than applying general rules to particular cases.

This politics, rooted in feeling and moral or ethical sense, may feel like it has no anchor or grounding, or offers no clear critique, strategy or vision of the future.<sup>67</sup> Philip seems to be longing for some kind of certainty, a road map, a philosophy, which alleviates some of the burden of assessing each event or issue on its merits and in relation to his moral or ethical views. Philip sees a world of complexity and grey, looks at those around him who feel great passion for particular causes and sees in them some certainty or truth. In this context it is easy to see why Philip might long for a primal shelter (Kristeva, 1993), or as he suggests, an overarching philosophy that would provide all the answers and put an end to incessant evaluation and assessment.

At this point one might think that I have suggested two incompatible factors co-exist, namely individualisation and an interconnected relational self. I would argue however, as above, that while almost all participants posit a notion of self which is much more relational and interconnected than liberal notions of a pre-existing, atomised, discrete self, this in no way alleviates the burden of individualisation. That the young people in this study think of themselves as part of vast interconnected global networks, and believe their political knowledge and commitments have been fostered and furthered by friends,

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<sup>67</sup> A characteristic many contemporary activist groups share (Klein, 2000; Melucci, 1985; Licheterman, 1999)

family, and significant life events, in no way means that they are somehow exempt from the processes of individualisation, the demand to take responsibility for one's own life and carve out an identity. That these young people feel part of families, friendship groups, and implicated in the world around them does not mean they are part of a community or way of life which provides them with an identity, with requisite knowledge for how life should be lived. On the contrary, participants like Monica, Patrick, Nicola, Kate, John, Mark, and Heidi are engaged in creating new identities which combine public, private, and the political in new ways.

Chris also grapples with practicing a politics without a rulebook, and the difficult task of negotiating politics, the people he meets through his involvement, and his emotions:

*I get pretty emotional um, with other people's needs and experiences, and I think it's not, it's not always good to be like that, but you know I don't, I don't really know who's there to tell you what's good and what's not...*

Chris' comments here recall Philip's experiences and the individualised journey one takes in negotiating political/ethical spheres. In risk society, where the processes of individualisation reign supreme, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim say, "there are no historical models for the conduct of life" (2002, p. 26). Hence, watching and learning from others is a key strategy for working out the best way to go about things, but so too is reflexivity. Reflecting on ourselves, what has worked and what has not, why we think particular things and not others, why we identify one way and not another, and why others define us in particular ways, is the other critical skill demanded by risk society and individualisation's insistence that we make our own lives. Nicola provides several examples of how she has used reflexivity in her life to create the person she is today:

*... My whole life I think I've been you know, um an activist, but it was only until you know, I understood or had the label to understand what that meant, um you know I could def, I could um, identify and define myself as such.*

For Nicola, claiming an activist or feminist identity – even interpreting her concern for those who are disadvantaged or suffer inequality as an interest in social justice – has been a process. As she says, this journey is partly about self-reflection and partly about learning a language to interpret what she sees as a fundamental part of her character:

*... I think it's through a series of self-discovery that you um, you stop and ask yourself you know, who am I? What am I doing? And um how do I want to define myself beyond just my work...*

As the above passage suggests, Nicola makes an active effort to define herself as more than what she does in her work. This, in part, has meant seeing herself as a feminist/activist:

*You know someone asked me, 'what is feminism to you?' and in doing that um, you know I found that I am a feminist and I'm proud to say that I am. And that, by the, you know, by the mere fact that I'm quite active in doing other things that I'm more than just a feminist, I'm an activist as well. And you know, I use an example of someone being a vegetarian, or I've boycotted various products and um, you know, that's a political statement and that's you know, part of me being active I guess.*

Again we see Nicola reflecting on herself, and how she wants to define herself. During the interview she tells a story of how she came to further understand her own position and how she and institutions define activism:

*Um, okay I'll give you a good example (or what I think is a good example) is I had to write, I was applying to go to the xenophobia forum in Africa which was a UN [United Nations] conference of sorts, and part of the application process you had to you know um, supply your CV [curriculum vitae] and also talk about all the other things you'd been involved with that um demonstrated your activism. And you know, I thought on paper I don't look like an activist and I won't look that good in comparison to other [applicants], but my whole life; um, because you can't really*

*use examples of how you might have mediated or provided information about family or friends or in your school. Um, well that's how I felt at that time, I didn't think that those examples would be valued as much as being, being involved in a formalized structured group like you know, [name of young women's organization] or something like that. So um, at that point I was thinking a bit miffed that I had to justify, or feel like I had to justify what sort of activist I was and how good I was in order for me to get this opportunity, um when, when I felt that the definition or the criteria would be based on groups that I would be um associated with. And so then I looked at my life and I thought well the reasons why I hadn't had the opportunities to be involved in some of those structured groups is 'cos I come from an Italian background where my parents were migrants and their value was around education and they; it would be really difficult for them to understand why I would need to volunteer. And they still don't understand why I volunteer, they're like, **'You do that for no money! What do you mean?!**' Um, so I could understand where it came from, I was a bit um peeved but I understood that that's just the system and you sort of work with it, um but that was probably my first realization and um you know, to do some backward tracking and looking at well why is it that my life has turned out quite like that? ... and I guess in conjunction with that when I was looking at those examples of saving that dog and sticking up for that [indigenous] friend, it probably happened all around the same time. Um, and it was only because I was forced again to look at how people define and award certain things in our society.*

This story is a strong example of Nicola's ability to locate herself within broader structures and processes. She identifies that her practice of social justice may not fit more orthodox notions of activism, volunteering or participation, and she is also able to provide some account of why she did not have more experience with structured activist groups or volunteering. It is also worth noting that the examples she gives of mediation with friends or family or saving a lost dog or standing up to racism at school, would probably not be counted as participation or activism by quantitative research. Regardless of how quantitative research, bureaucratic processes or orthodoxy may define activism, volunteering or participation (or even social justice), this story is important for Nicola

because it was part of a longer process of interpreting herself as someone concerned about social justice even if she did not fit prescribed models or definitions. It is also important in terms of understanding her own background in relation to these definitions of activism, volunteering, and social justice. As she notes, Nicola's Italian background worked in part to close off certain forms of participation like volunteering.<sup>68</sup> Her background also blinded her to her feminism until she went to university:

*I, I to a, I don't necessarily come out to my parents and say 'I'm a feminist', but as long as I can fit in all the other family stuff first – so it's almost like family first and then I'm a feminist for my family, do you see what I mean? Um, but yeah, so growing up it was about um, sort of fitting it into my lifestyle um, and in many ways I almost kept a lot of that hidden away from my family because explaining it with; there's a language barrier, it's hard to describe a feminist in Italian, um and you know, and now I have some fantastic um discussions with my family about that sort of stuff and challenge them about lots of different things, which is good, but I still don't know if there's a term for feminism in Italian. I need to find that one out.*

Finally, Gillian<sup>69</sup> provides a slightly different perspective on reflexivity and *phronêsis* with her 'political/activist' practices, which she frames in a moral/ethical order. Gillian is a vegetarian and in discussing the pros and cons of becoming a vegan she reveals two key aspects of her ethico-political understanding and practice. While she thinks veganism is from a "moral" perspective a better practice, she thinks it would be too difficult for her to sustain, plus she has a weakness for ice cream:

*So it's really selfish of me ... I just sort of act like that I think how if everybody acted it would be a good thing. So I mean if we still milked some cows and had free-range chickens running about it wouldn't be causing huge problems, so I sort of think it's still okay to do that.*

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<sup>68</sup> Later in her life it opened up opportunities when she came to work in the multicultural sector.

<sup>69</sup> While Gillian's political practice closely resembles that discussed above under the heading "self as political", she is discussed here because, as was suggested in the previous chapter, she interprets her 'political/activist' engagements in non-political ways, preferring to frame them within an ethical/moral order.



Gillian is reflexive about her behaviour and sees it within a very broad context of environmental impact. She understands herself to be a player in environmentalism simply through her daily practices and choices. The other key point to note in this section is Gillian's use of the word moral in relation to the merits of veganism and vegetarianism. Hence for Gillian, her practice of vegetarianism is couched within a moral/ethical order, as opposed to the political. It seems fair to suggest that Gillian understands much of her activism as part of an ethical/moral practice. As discussed in Chapter Seven, she does not see her involvement with anti-war groups as political, and she connects the environmental benefits of vegetarianism/veganism with morality. Gillian, like others discussed in this chapter, practice a kind of micro politics/ethics, which views one's daily practices as important and connected to broader issues and movements like environmentalism.

Gillian's understanding and approach to political issues reflects Philip's issue by issue approach – politics of the particular:

*Nathan: So um do you um – how to ask this without sounding wanky? – do you identify as being um, left wing? Sounds silly but,*

*Gillian: Um, I suppose as other people would define it, I guess.*

*Nathan: But you wouldn't define it like that?*

*Gillian: Um, well I guess I would say I quite strongly disagree with everything that would be considered as right wing [laughs]. So yeah, so I wouldn't be insulted if someone said that to me, but I, I don't think it's really so important, I mainly look at things on an issue by issue basis.*

For Gillian it is not all that important that her political views translate to a coherent, established ideology or -ism. As we saw in her comments about vegetarianism, she considers the ramifications of her actions by applying them to a broader context – imaging the effects if everyone acted in the same way. In this she displays another feature of Aristotelian ethics, in so far as she sees her good (with regard to the environment) as also being the good of others with whom she is “bound up in human community”

(MacIntyre, 1981, p. 213). She also places an emphasis upon everyday practice. Such an approach looks more like what we would typically describe as an ethics or moral code, rather than a politics, and indeed, Gillian emphasises the moral/ethical dimension. However, to focus upon whether an individual interprets their actions within a moral/ethical or political framework would mean missing the underlying shift. People like Gillian, and others discussed in this chapter, relate to the world through their own values and beliefs rather than an external doctrine, ideology or -ism. It is not important that their political views form some coherent world-view or ideology, which also explains how other systems like the economy should be organised. They practice what could be described as a micro-politics (Monica actually uses similar terms above) or a politicised ethics, because even participants like Gillian – who is perhaps more comfortable with her ethical practice than the world of mainstream politics – recognise that hegemonic politics is never far from her involvement. And those that have more of an emphasis on the political allow their politics to bleed into their daily life and practices, and of course values. This form of ethico-political practice is one which intrinsically involves the self, one's values and beliefs, and is incorporated into an everyday practice.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has shown the polysemic nature of politics through the political understandings and practices of the participants of the current research. It began by examining the political understandings and practices of a group of participants who revel in and contribute to the undermining of liberalism and hegemonic politics' public/private divide. They achieve this in a number of different ways by locating politics within their 'private' lives and identities. Not only does their 'private' life and world become a theatre for political action, but for many their very identity and being is understood as political. Underwriting this practice of life and self as political is a notion of the self which contrasts sharply with the model of the self proffered by classical liberalism. Unlike classical liberalism's discrete, atomised, and pre-existing self discussed in Chapter Three, the participants of this study articulated a more relational and interconnected self. They understood themselves to be located within global networks and hence inherently capable of affecting change in the world around them. Moreover, they articulated a self, which

developed over time, was nurtured and instructed by friends, family, and community. It was these bonds which helped many maintain their political commitments and practices. This model of the self also reflects participants' understanding and experience of malleable and permeable public/private spheres, where 'private' views and experiences come to bear on public/political views and practices, and 'public' views and experiences can be practiced and realised within the 'private' sphere and daily life.

The following section, taking its lead from research by Harris (2001; Harris and Bulbeck, forthcoming) and Bhavnani (1991; see also Matthews et al. 1998/9), discussed the ways in which the participants of this study were cynically disengaged from mainstream politics. This section added further empirical weight to the idea that disengagement, and of course cynicism, can reflect a level of engagement, critique, and profound dissatisfaction with mainstream politics. It also further bolstered the semantic separation of apathy from cynicism; instead of the conflation of apathy and cynicism often characteristic of the research discussed in Chapter One. This section also discussed Heidi's ambiguity around politics and the notion that it may in part be explained by her desire to have some control over politics in her life. Heidi's relationship and experience of politics provides a useful counterpoint to participants like Monica, Patrick, Nicola, Kate, John, and Mark, highlighting some of the challenges and risks involved in making one's personal life a theatre for politics. Moreover, Heidi's experience draws attention to the notion of autonomy and control in one's relationship with politics; politics is *always* just beyond Heidi's control. Whereas Monica, Patrick, Nicola, Kate, John, and Mark have chosen to politicise themselves and their daily life, Heidi can always be denied this choice as her ethnicity can be used by others to pull her into a political context.

The final section of this chapter discussed the role of reflexivity and *phronêsis* in participants' understanding and practice of politics. This meant that for several participants they practiced a politics of particularities, approaching issues in their terms (*phronêsis*), rather than applying an ideology, or general principals to particular cases. For many participants it mattered little that their ethico-political understanding and practice did not provide a framework for how society in general should operate. It was

argued that this reflected the retreat of ideology and the rise of reflexivity, in a modernity characterised by risk and uncertainty, and the demand that individuals take responsibility for their own lives.

The following chapter will conclude this thesis by reviewing the evidence for and against the discourse of apathetic and disengaged youth. It will argue that this discourse is based upon the unreflexive application of faulty assumptions about youth and politics in late modernity. Moreover, it will explore the implications for the analysis of politics in an era where liberalism's public/private divide has been fundamentally undermined.

# Conclusion

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## **Introduction**

This thesis has examined the discourse which claims youth are apathetic and disengaged from politics. It has explored the two assumptions which underlie this discourse: namely, a deficit model of youth which posits youth as a period of linear transition to adulthood, and its unreflexive and unproblematised application of a narrow liberal definition of politics. The meaning and practice of politics has been explored, via the historical origins of the dominant liberal model, and its application in late modernity where discrete public and private worlds have been undermined, in large measure, by new technology and the ideology of social movements. Findings from this study's qualitative research of young people's understanding and practice of politics has revealed that many participants give politics a great deal of consideration, while their application of the dominant liberal model of politics can cause tensions both in practice and conceptually, in terms of what counts as politics. Furthermore, some understand and practice politics in a number of ways which lie beyond the paradigm of hegemonic politics.

This concluding chapter will begin by reviewing and evaluating the 'youth as apathetic discourse'; following this will be a discussion of the results of the present research. Finally, this chapter will consider some of the implications these findings hold for the study of young people and politics in late modernity.

## **Evaluating the 'Youth as Apathetic and Disengaged' Discourse**

Chapter One of this thesis canvassed the evidence for the case that young people are indeed apathetic and disengaged from politics. This chapter showed that several sections of society, the media, government, and social scientists, have raised concerns about young people's apparent lack of interest and knowledge about politics. Indeed, the recent Australian research discussed in this chapter repeatedly found young people to: lack

interest and knowledge of basic political concepts; feel negative and cynical about politics and political parties, and untrusting of politicians; feel politics is boring and holds little of interest for them; and feel remote and disconnected from the world of politics. The following two chapters, however, attempted to undermine the case for young people being apathetic by arguing that the discourse rests on two faulty assumptions – that youth is a period of linear transition to adulthood, and the application of a narrow, regulatory model of liberal politics based on classical liberalism and the Scottish Enlightenment thinkers' ideas about what politics is, its proper place and how it should operate in social life.

Chapter Two argued that youth is a social construct, varying across time, cultures, and societies. The discussion of contemporary youth in society attempted to show that over the past several decades, major social changes have taken place and fundamentally ruptured young people's traditional transitions to adulthood. With the collapse of the youth labour market in the 1970s, young people were increasingly forced to pursue further education, resulting in young people 'delaying' traditional markers of adulthood – leaving home, full-time employment, marriage, parenthood. With the traditional path to adulthood being shattered, young people have begun blending different aspects of their life (Du Bois-Reymond, 1998).

In light of these changes and recent trends in social capital and 'community capacity building', local governments, among others, have attempted to find new ways at increasing young people's social and political participation. A range of measures, for example youth advisor boards and groups (see Saggars, et al. 2004), have been set up around Australia and internationally to include young people in their communities. However, research into these youth participation strategies have repeatedly found them to be tokenistic, if not a new form of governance and surveillance of young people (Bessant, 2003), rarely imparting any real decision making power to the young people involved or the bodies and groups which they are asked to be a part of (Fahmey, 2003; Manning and Ryan, 2004; Matthews et al., 1998/9; Print et al., 2005; White and Wyn, 2004; Wyness et al., 2004). Indeed, some of these authors have argued that such tokenistic attempts at

youth participation may very well contribute to the disengagement and disaffection of young people who get involved only to be greeted with vacant gestures (Manning and Ryan, 2004; Matthews et al., 1998/9; Print et al., 2005). This critique of youth participation strategies highlighted the shortcomings of simplistic social capital initiatives which call for people to simply get involved with their community. As Nina Eliasoph (1998) shows, participation for its own sake does not necessarily allow people to engage with broader issues, to conduct public spirited conversations about the how's, why's, what's, and for whom of their volunteering efforts. Such participation strategies may be so task or needs-oriented as to curtail broader political discussions, denying crucial citizenry skills like defining political issues or imagining how things could be better.

Having explored the faulty assumption of a deficit model of youth, where youth is understood as a linear transition to adulthood, Chapter Three began the task of opening up the meaning of the political. It was argued that part of what bolsters the discourse of apathetic youth is the application of *particular* conceptions of politics – where the subtext of research seems to be ‘Why aren’t young people doing politics and citizenship the way we did and the way we want/expect them to?’ The work of Harris and Bhavnani highlighted the critical difference between cynicism and apathy, where cynicism requires a level of engagement and critique rather than apathy’s flippant disregard.

This chapter also discussed a counter to the youth as apathetic discourse. Research from the UK which suggested researcher and participant may not actually share meanings about key terms like politics (Henn et al., 2002), was followed up and investigated by Australian researchers who indeed found that participant understandings of citizenship varied considerably; not only from the researchers, but also from one another, with many participants holding two or more conflicting definitions at once (Manning and Ryan, 2004). This work led to the argument that researchers should consider their research from young people’s perspective.

At a quantitative level, Vromen’s (2003) research has shown that when a broader notion of politics/participation is employed, young people *are* actively engaged in community

life. Vromen found, in stark contrast to claims that there is a ‘crisis’ in the political and civic engagement of young Australians, that 93 per cent of her broadly representative sample had involvement with or membership of a group of some kind. Her findings are broadly reflected by recent ABS data showing that almost 30 per cent of young people between the ages 18-34 had undertaken voluntary work in the previous twelve months (ABS, 2006). Other research by Vromen has drawn attention to the way a traditional, undemocratic gendered division of labour persists within the private sphere and makes participation, even within a now democratised public sphere, difficult for women, particularly when they become parents. Investigating the interaction of gender and participation draws attention to the gender dimensions of young people’s rejection of “institutionalized party political forms of participation in preference for informal, group-based, and issue-centred forms of participation, which are also conducive to women’s involvement.” (p. 292)

An historical excursion into the origins of the narrow liberal model of politics showed, firstly, through the discussion of civic humanism and the Country Ideology, that the dominant contemporary understanding of politics and its role in social life is not the only way of doing politics. Secondly, the regulatory and legalistic model of politics we live with today, that which was bequeathed to the West by the Scottish Enlightenment, developed under and in response to specific historical and social conditions. The lineage, indeed the hegemonic status, of this depoliticised morality and demoralised politics is clear to see in the research discussed in Chapter One. If young people are not interested in the dominant issues of taxation, inflation, employment, or interest rates, then they are deemed to be lacking interest in *politics*. Political practices undertaken by young people which blend public and private are typically missed by research operating with a notion of politics which maintains a decisive split between public and private spheres. Precisely because the Scottish model of an administrative, regulatory, demoralised politics is hegemonic, unreflexive deployment of the term politics in research effectively squeezes out any form of ‘politics’ which falls beyond its bounds. Such contemporary researchers are reifying the assumptions of a model of politics developed some two hundred and fifty



years ago, which in itself is not necessarily a problem, save for the tremendous social change which has occurred since this model was developed.

Chapter Four discussed recent social theory and its broader but complementary argument to that of the discourse of apathetic youth. Following this argument, the loss of community and strong social bonds, and the processes of individualisation and privatisation have fundamentally eroded the public sphere, leaving individuals atomised and socially isolated, homeless, unable to connect with others and form publics or enact politics. Privatisation has reduced the public sphere to the airing of private sentiments, and in consumer society where people are individualised, failure is a purely private matter and “rebounds in guilt and shame, not in political protest” (Bauman, 1991, p. 261). This argument was countered however, with alternative theoretical approaches that contest the one-way decline of the public sphere and its colonisation by the private through problematising the very notion of a public/private divide. Instead, the thesis proffered an argument that in contemporary society few aspects of social life remain on one side or the other of the divide. Therefore, while the public sphere may be changing, we are witnessing the blending or hybridisation of mobile public/private worlds rather than simply its colonisation by the private.

Canvassing recent studies of new forms of political action, like political consumerism or those political repertoires associated with sub-politics (Beck), life politics (Giddens), or personalised politics, Lichterman (1996) added empirical weight to the theoretical argument that public and private are interacting in new ways. One can view their life as a political project, imbuing everyday life and decisions with political meaning; an interest in the health of one’s family can lead to anti-toxic activism; shopping can be an opportunity to voice concerns and preferences for goods produced and traded in particular (humane, environmentally sustainable, fair) ways. Drawing on an interest in self-expression and fulfilment can create new forms of connection and commitment, the ideology of social movements which highlight the connections between public and private spheres can lead to a broadening of moral horizons.

When we take a closer look at young people's social circumstances and experiences, the relationship between young people and politics is not as clear and simple as the discourse of youth apathy would lead us to believe. Young people are socially and politically involved, but in part the older institutions historically used to integrate them with the polity have become less relevant as 'youth' has extended and young people blend different aspects of their lives. The focus on youth and apathy has positioned apathy and disengagement as *youth* problems and foreclosed the possibility that adults too are apathetic, disengaged and disillusioned with politics. Moreover, there have been changes in the way politics can be conducted, meaning studies which rely on the traditional, liberal, regulatory model of politics excludes young people practicing these new forms of politics.

## **Results From the Present Study:**

### *Drawing on the dominant discourse*

Most participants of the present study defined politics according to the dominant, liberal paradigm of politics. After all, it has been the hegemonic form of politics in much of the West since its inception in the eighteenth century. These young people largely conceive of politics as being about structures and institutions like parliament, government, voting, and elections. Politics is most definitely something which takes place within the public sphere, in turn creating a non-political private sphere. Participants' hegemonic understanding of politics was often accompanied by a practice of politics which emphasises the role of parliaments, boards and councils, government, representation, voting.

Beyond this model's ideological, cultural, and social dominance, one of the key features for most of the participants discussed in this section is that in large measure they are able to make hegemonic politics work for them, to enact their political goals and vision. This paradigm however, makes it impossible to view one's own life as a political project and limits one's ability to see how life chances are shaped by external, social, cultural, and political forces. The hegemonic liberal model of politics bolsters the process of

individualisation through its ideological cleansing of politics from the private sphere, rendering individuals largely responsible for their own lives, its success, happiness, failings, and shortcomings.

### *Tensions in theory and practice*

During the course of the interviews it became clear there were, for many participants, real tensions in their political understanding and practice. Sometimes this tension was between a participants' political practice and their hegemonic understanding of politics, while other examples were at a more personal level. A frequent tension was participants' reluctance at identifying themselves as a feminist or activist. Most female participants were very reluctant to describe themselves as feminists and were uncomfortable with the term. Even those participants who were more comfortable being labelled a feminist, of which there were only two (Nicola and Mary), felt the need to clarify what they meant by feminism and what kind of feminist they were. It was argued that young women eschewed a feminist identity and felt the need to describe what kind of feminist they were because of stereotypes about feminism and feminists as being man haters, lesbians, fat and ugly. It is striking that while many of the young women discussed in this section were involved with activities that could be described as feminist (women's action groups, women only peace groups and protest groups), they remained ambivalent and shrugged off a feminist label.

A similar tension arose in regard to participants' willingness to describe themselves as activists. Despite numerous participants' involvement with activity that might be described as activism, few were willing to claim an activist identity for themselves. It was argued that rather than being a symptom of a conformist, narcissistic culture or other-directed personality, this reluctance on behalf of participants to take on an activist identity, even though they were engaged in *activism*, was more a reflection of their understanding of politics as defined by the hegemonic liberal paradigm of politics and its public/private split. These participants equated activism with undertaking public, political action which conforms to established modes of activism like rallies and protests. Hence,

all the ‘backstage’ work that goes into organizing such an event is sequestered off from the ‘real’ activism which takes place on the day of the protest/rally.

This chapter again highlighted the dominance of the liberal hegemonic model of politics. Even those participants whose understanding and practice of politics operates beyond the bounds of the dominant model continued to interpret their actions according to the dominant liberal paradigm. As a result, they devalued their own interests and practices, and saw themselves as un-political, lacking proper knowledge to participate in ‘real’ capital ‘P’ politics.

Finally, this chapter showed that even for those who adhere most closely to the liberal hegemonic model of politics, tensions still arise. It was argued that Paul’s political views were constitutive of him, rather than mere attributes he has, putting the model of self he presents in the interview in stark contrast with his political philosophy and classical liberalism’s discrete unencumbered self. The tensions for Peter, on the other hand, are more a product of the incompatibility of maintaining a liberal public/private split at this point in history. Peter is unable to prevent public-political dimensions from seeping into his private life. All the while his political philosophy, which prizes choice, denies him the choice to realise the political potentials lurking in his private practices and self.

### ***Polysemic Politics***

The final chapter of results from the present research discussed the polysemic way in which many participants practice and understand politics. The political practice I have described as ‘self as political’ was discussed first, and showed the ways in which participants located politics within the ‘private’ sphere and practiced their beliefs in their everyday lives. These participants, for example, understand what they eat, what they buy and choose not to buy, where they bank and invest, the amount of water they use, the kind of work they do, and how they speak and treat others, as important ethico-political acts. Their political practice rests on the notion that what one does in ‘private’ is relevant and has real effects beyond its ‘private’ context. It was argued that what underscores the political understandings and practices of Monica, Patrick, Nicola, Kate, John, and Mark

is the great Durkheimian (1984) insight that individuals are increasingly interconnected in modernity. With this awareness, these participants read their everyday actions and decisions as having real consequences on the world around them. And if one's actions are interpreted as having real affects on the world, on people's wages and conditions, the welfare of animals, farming practices and the environment, then very few actions remain discrete and 'private'.

Locating oneself within interconnected global networks, as these participants do, not only fundamentally undermines liberalism's public/private divide, it also implies a model of the self in stark contrast to liberalism's discrete, individualised, atomised self. Indeed, this was not the only example of participants eschewing liberalism's atomised self in favour of a relational, interconnected self. As discussed in Chapter Five, Monica, Indi, and Mark outed themselves during their interviews and aligned themselves with communities of others, activists, sex-workers, homosexuals, queers. Many participants talked about the importance of friends and family in nurturing and encouraging their political views and involvement. Numerous participants also spoke of how life experiences had shaped their political views and commitments. For some, this occurred through university, travel, employment, experiencing racism, sexism or homophobia, and for others it occurred through living arrangements and intimate relationships.

All this indicates that for these participants, their political views and practices are a product of family and friendships, developing over time and through significant life experiences. Their political views and commitments have taken shape over the years in a manner which reflects a permeable 'public'/'private' divide, where 'private' experiences do come to bear upon political views and 'public'/'political' practices, similarly 'public'/'political' experiences impact on the 'private' realm, one's interests, understanding and actions. Thus, not only do Monica, Patrick, Nicola, Kate, John, and Mark locate themselves within global interconnected networks, but *all* participants posit a notion of self which is much more relational and interconnected than liberal/Romantic notions of a pre-existing, atomised, discrete self.

This chapter also returned to the idea discussed in Chapter Three that cynicism and disengagement from politics are often the *result* of some level of engagement. While some of these participants may be disengaged from politics, they are certainly not apathetic. Through physical, conceptual and critical engagement these participants have developed arguments and interpretations that justify their lack of involvement in a form of politics they feel is unworthy of their participation.

Finally, a practice described as involving *phronêsis* and reflexivity was used to explain the way some participants practiced a politics of particularities; judging events and ideas on their own terms and relating them back to one's values and sense of ethics/morality, rather than applying general principals to particular cases. It was argued that in an individualised society where "there are no historical models for the conduct of life (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p. 26), watching and learning from others is a key strategy in getting by, but so too is reflexivity – reflecting on ourselves: what has worked and what has not, why we think particular things and not others, why we identify one way and not another, why others define us in particular ways and so on. This discussion highlighted a further shift in the way politics is being conducted. Many of the participants discussed in this chapter relate to the world through their own values and beliefs, rather than an external doctrine, ideology or –ism. It is not important that their political views form some coherent world-view or ideology which also explains how other systems like the economy should be organised. They practice a micro-politics or politicised ethics, which inherently involves the self, one's values and beliefs, and is incorporated into an everyday practice. The participants discussed in this chapter have harnessed the insights of the new social movements – the gay rights and environmental movements, and women's liberation – that began the problematisation of liberalism's public/private split. They have seized upon the new opportunities for political practice opening up in the 'private' sphere, and in turn have re-moralised a politics cut off from its ethical roots some two-hundred and fifty years ago.

## *Implications*

What might the implications of these findings be for the study of young people and politics? Firstly, it seems clear that the discourse of apathetic and disengaged young people is misguided. Its focus on young people blinds us to the ways in which adults are disengaged and apathetic about politics. We need to apply models of politics which match up with young people's practice and understanding of politics if we want a better picture of young people's relationship with politics. This means broadening out the meaning of politics. Secondly, we must acknowledge that the public/private divide is fundamentally undermined in late modernity and cannot be sustained. Its untenable status was highlighted in particular by discussion of Peter's liberalism. While of course he has a choice about what he understands the political to be, he is unable to prevent public/political matters from seeping in to his 'private' life. This does not mean, as Bauman and other theorists would have us believe, that the public sphere has simply been colonised by the private. On the contrary, social life is filled with mobile, hybrid public/private worlds, wherein we experience the public and private in a more fluid manner, an experience much more in line with a *Liquid Modernity* than the binary opposition of public/private. This is not to suggest that 'the public sphere' is not under threat, or that politics is not marginalised by the private lives of public figures or that public space has not been swallowed-up by commercial interests. In fact, one could argue that with the splintering of the public sphere it is even more difficult to maintain sustained focus on any given issue. However, the emergence of mobile, hybrid public/private worlds means that the opportunities for political practice are all around us. It is no longer necessary to enter the 'public sphere' to take political action, it can be done in the supermarket, in the bathroom or at the bank.

Following on from the demise of the public private split is the realisation that the dominant notion of politics, which takes the public/private divide as its bedrock, does not reflect the social circumstances of life in late modernity. With the death of the public/private divide, the liberal hegemonic notion of politics no longer has enough sociological relevance to demand individuals engage with it. Of course, it goes without saying that this form of politics still has large amounts of political power, which ensures

its relevance and that people will continue to want to be involved. In a way, that the dominant model of politics separates morality/ethics and politics, and aims at being the arbiter of social life rather than an integral part of its community, in a word its very *narrowness*, contributes to its increasing irrelevance. With multiple mobile public spheres opening up, mainstream politics no longer has a monopoly over the public sphere, or indeed politics. And if people can engage in a form of politics which meets their ethical/moral needs as well as their political goals, they have even less reason to engage in mainstream politics in anything but an instrumental way, supporting the party which will provide the most benefit to them as individuals.

Britain's POWER report (2006) makes a similar argument about the dwindling levels of engagement with formal democratic participation, arguing that the shift from industrial to post-industrial society has spawned new citizens who, following the process of individualisation, "enjoy and expect to make decisions for themselves" (p. 103), and have lost the sense of deference for established authority characteristic of previous times and generations. And while the West can be seen as experiencing a 'cultural revolution' which emphasised "self-worth and self-determination" (p. 103) – leading to the kind of activists and political repertoires discussed above and by Lichterman (1996; 1999) – our institutions of democratic government have not kept pace with this change and more closely match the world of industrial society, with its sharper class distinctions and deference toward authority.

With people's turn to new forms of political repertoire, which bind together the self, politics and morality/ethics, we must acknowledge that these new forms of political practice are meeting people's needs and desires. For one, we can note that these forms of politics provide a forum for issues like feminism, political consumerism, environmentalism, vegetarianism; issues that are institutionally repressed (Giddens, 1991) by mainstream politics. Moreover, we can note that these forms of politics reconnect politics with morality/ethics and provide people with a means for living out their political/moral/ethical beliefs. This is politics of the age of individualisation, providing the scope for an almost infinite number of ways of compiling political beliefs



and practices. Each person is able to personalise their interest in feminism, environmentalism, fair trade, human rights et cetera, by the way they incorporate these beliefs in their everyday lives. The previous chapter noted the decline of ideology, which can be seen as further adding to the scope for individualising politics. Because these forms of politics are not defined by particular overarching ideologies, individuals can make *choices* about which elements of their political beliefs they will incorporate into their daily lives. From the multitude of choices provided by political consumerism to practices around energy and water conservation to one's choice of transport to diet to where one lives and how one makes a living, individuals make a pastiche of political practices, beliefs, and commitments. Beyond this level of political practice, in the absence of strong ideology, individuals have greater opportunity to create personalised emotional attachments and narratives about their political commitments and practices, deploying them as part of the reflexive project of the self. The way political beliefs and practices were intertwined with participants' identity and moral/ethical self was powerfully demonstrated in the previous chapter.

Finally, it is worthwhile considering the implications of the relational/interconnected self for the study of politics in late modernity. Firstly, that an interconnected self was an important feature of the political understanding of numerous participants, particularly those who have politicised their daily lives, further highlights the demise of the public/private divide. No longer is it necessary for one's political views to be attached to objects of the public sphere: external bodies like a political party or an ideology like socialism. Politics can be a completely individualised and hence 'private' set of practices and beliefs, used as part of identity formation. Claiming an interconnected self, one aware of how its actions impact on the world around it, not only bypasses the public/private divide by making the 'private' sphere a theatre for political action and commitment, but also circumvents national borders and hence, national politics. As discussed in the previous chapter, participants felt they were doing something for their belief in human rights or equitable global trade by making informed choices about the products they consume. Entering the public sphere and working within an institution of hegemonic politics is not the only way to practice one's beliefs and work toward the kind of world

one envisages. And even if one does want to be a part of hegemonic institutionalised politics, like Kate, John, Mark, and Chris, one can complement this traditional practice through the politicisation of private life.

Clearly, the processes of individualisation, the new social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, ‘the inward turn’ and the emphasis on self-fulfilment and self-expression, the demise of communism and ideology more generally, the acceleration of globalisation and its concomitant compression of time and space, have all contributed to an opening up of the political and an undermining of the dominance of national and party politics. There is an argument to be made for the notion that hegemonic politics has not kept pace with these social changes, has not modernised itself to reflect a post-industrial economy and a late modern modernity. Nonetheless, hegemonic politics maintains a great deal of political power, and as this thesis makes clear, it continues to exert extensive ideological power, framing the paradigm of politics.

While there may be a weakening link between ‘politics’ and party politics, more significantly this thesis highlights the need to be attuned to the subtler trends in modernity. Young people are clearly not *only* lacking in knowledge and interest in politics, indeed, young people may not be the only ones disengaging from hegemonic politics. Our social world is not only characterised by social atomisation, privatisation, homelessness and frivolous consumerism. Individualisation does sometimes produce the above affects, but coupled with the other changes like globalisation and the new social movements it has also created the space for new forms of connection and commitment, a broadening of political repertoire and moral horizons.

# Appendix A

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In this appendix, I want to briefly outline some of the research done overseas, mainly in the United Kingdom, which examines the ‘problem’ of young people and politics.

In the United Kingdom, where voting is not compulsory, much of the debate about young people and politics centres around young people’s low voter turnout rates. In the recent general election held in May 2005, MORI estimated the turnout rate for those aged 18 – 24 years as 37 per cent, down 2 per cent from the previous election in 2001 (MORI, 2005). More than half of those aged between 25 and 34 years did not vote in this or the previous election, with voter turnout rates at 49 per cent for 2005, up 3 per cent from 2001.

While there is no doubt that the low voter turnout rates for young people are the focus for concerns about young people’s ‘apathy’ or disengagement from politics, much of the research coming out of the United Kingdom tends to adopt Harris’ (Harris and Bulbeck, forthcoming) second explanation of disengagement, citing serious socio-economic reasons for such disengagement.

With a greater international focus, Ballington’s article (2001) reports on a democracy forum held in Stockholm in 1999 which involved over one hundred young people discussing the future of democracy and the challenges and opportunities that confront them. She says that participants noted numerous obstacles that frustrate the participation of young people, “from not understanding how the system works, to a growing distrust of political institutions and leaders, to a lack of time in today’s competitive environment.” (p. 12) The participants also found cause to emphasise that they are not apathetic but feel alienated from mainstream politics and its processes, and sceptical about the efficacy of their participation (Ballington, 2001, p. 12). In Ballington’s pithy overview of young people’s political participation, she also finds time to note the importance of new forms

of political expression, citing comments from Mahlengi Bhengu, former chairperson of the National Youth Commission in South Africa:

*We don't have such a thing as youth apathy. What I think we are finding, especially in countries facing the challenge of deepening and consolidating democracy, are new forms of political expression by young people. Now that political democracy has been achieved in South Africa for example, young people feel, like any other member of society, that they have the opportunity to express themselves in different ways, whether through performing arts, sports or workshops. And this in itself is not antithetical to their continued participation in democratic processes.* (from International IDEA, 1999, p. 6, cited in Ballington, 2001, p. 13)

Setting the tone for more recent research from both, the United Kingdom and Australia, White, Bruce and Ritchie's (2000) study of the politics of 14 – 24 year olds marks an early step towards letting young people conceptualise politics in their own words. This qualitative research used a combination of focus groups, paired and individual interviews with 193 young people to explore their political interests and engagement. They found young people to have a range of issues of concern, covering the personal sphere, local community, national, and global issues (pp. 6 – 10). They classified young people into five groups “according to their declared level of interest in politics and how they amplified and explained their level of connection with politics:

- Group 1 – Indifferent
- Group 2 – Cynically uninterested
- Group 3 – Selectively interested
- Group 4 – Generically interested
- Group 5 – Highly interested and connected” (p. 11)

The categories are largely explained by their names, but, in brief, those in the indifferent group generally paid no notice of politics and felt it irrelevant to their lives. Group 2 obviously held cynical views about politics and would actively avoid engaging with it, expressing “mistrust of, and lack of respect for, politicians.” (p. 13) They also felt

politicians paid little attention to the views of young people and noted how, until one is 18, young people are largely excluded from political engagement. Those who were selectively interested would engage with politics around certain issues of concern; “Otherwise they share similar views about politics as the previous two groups.” (p. 13) Young people who were generically interested had an interest in politics which ranged from passing to more substantial. Their focus tended to be on current affairs rather than parliamentary politics and they tended to be more passively interested in politics than the previous group. The final group who were highly interested and connected, were much more committed and interested in politics than the other groups, with interest ranging from constitutional and international matters to following parliamentary politics and sometimes actively pursuing such concerns (for more detail see pages 11 – 15).

Of great concern for thinking about young people and politics is that White et al.’s research shows young people as being a *heterogenous* group with regards to politics. Levels of political interest and engagement vary across groups of young people, and they move from being a homogenous generation who appear to be tuned out, more akin to Beavis and Butthead, to being socio-political actors who respond to the world around them, rather than dominated by apathy and self-interest.

Furthermore, when young people talk about what turns them off politics (when someone listens and takes note), we find a range of reasons which account for low levels of interest and disengagement with far more rigour than the totalising label of ‘apathetic’. Politics was often characterised as boring, but White et al. note that underpinning this boredom with politics was the perception that it lacked relevance for the lives of young people. “Indeed, it was commonly said that young people are preoccupied with other interests and activities, which dominate their lives, thereby leaving little time to devote to politics.” (p. 15) This is an explanation for young people’s lack of interest and disengagement from politics that we shall return to later in the chapter. A lack of knowledge and understanding of politics, along with the kind of language used, was also found to turn some young people away from politics. One of Harris’ participants makes very similar comments about how politics excludes young people:

*Dominant culture goes around saying “young people aren’t interested in politics, young people don’t really care” and all that sort of thing. ... By saying that young people are politically apathetic, it’s just a way of trying to reinforce that. And also because the language of politics is, deliberately I think, non-inclusive. So I know that a lot of young people have very valid things to say and good ideas about the political climate but they don’t have words like “framework”. ... They don’t have words like that to use and therefore if you’re not using that particular language, does it mean that what you’ve got to say doesn’t count? ... The language of politics is deliberately exclusive, it’s only supposed to be understood and be spoken by people of a certain class. (Harris and Bulbeck, forthcoming)*

Like Australian research from Print et al. (2004); Manning and Ryan (2004); Mellor et al. (2002); and Mellor (1998), White et al.’s findings also indicate a deep lack of trust for politicians among young people, and this in turn was used by some participants to explain their lack of interest in politics. Politicians’ lack of interest in the views and concerns of young people was also frequently mentioned by young people as something that turned them off politics. Indeed, Martin Wattenberg makes similar comments in the context of his international comparative research, arguing that young people’s low voter turnout rates are, in part, caused by a lack of representation, with “young people’s opinions on the issues ... not being faithfully represented through the political process.” (2003, cited in Johnson and Marshall, 2004, p. 9)

In line with Beresford and Phillips (1997) and Lean (1996), White et al. found as young people were further integrated into society (for example through the workforce or starting a family) and brought into contact with aspects of politics, their interest and engagement was sparked. Being exposed to information about politics could spawn an interest as could the opportunity to engage in politics – being able to vote for example (see p. 16 – 17).

When looking at political engagement, White et al., much like Bhavnani (1991; see also Mellor, 1998), found that young people tended to define politics quite narrowly, which

meant they were less likely to define their own activity as political. Not surprisingly, such a narrow notion of politics is not unique to young people, but is reflected in the community at large, as the following comments from research conducted by the UK Electoral Commission makes clear:

[many people] ... *understand 'politics' as being the soap opera that provides much of the media coverage of politics: 'slanging matches' between party leaders, the exposed lies of ministers, the scandal... They don't perceive their interest and concern in the delivery levels of key public services as inherently 'political' ... 'Politics' is an activity that 'other people' take part in; it is not a phrase or an activity that they associate with themselves.* (The Electoral Commission, 2003, cited in Johnson and Marshall, 2004, p. 13)

White et al. also found young people repeatedly voiced feelings of powerlessness and oft commented upon the limited number of opportunities for young people to be politically engaged. A lack of knowledge about engagement was also seen by young people as curbing their potential involvement. One young woman draws attention to the short shrift politics is given within school:

*It's just that young people don't seem to [know], nobody goes up to them and says "Ere you go, politics. If you've got anything you want to know, go and phone them or go and see them", or whatever. It's like at school, if somebody says. If you've got questions about your career, that's who you can reach to see about it. And they're given information but there isn't anybody that does the same for politics so they're not going to know.* (Female, 19 years) (White et al., 2000, p. 35)

Young people also consistently argued that their views were not heard by politicians, or dismissed as childish and unrealistic.<sup>70</sup> This sense of exclusion from politics made many young people feel that getting involved was pointless. While the authors clearly take the

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<sup>70</sup> Again, we can see the enduring influence of Rousseau and the notion of youth as deficit discussed in Chapter Two (also see Fahmy, 2003).

barriers to participation young people identify seriously, and they assert that “in the past too much emphasis has focussed on the apathy of the young” (p. 46), they continue to suggest that “a degree of apathy” underpins young people’s sense of the barriers to their participation. They use the following excerpt as evidence of such a degree of apathy:

*It’s really easy to be just really apathetic, be lazy about it ... If you want to change something you have to be really active. And unless a way of doing that is presented for you, it’s really easy to not bother to do it. (Female, 20 years) (p. 34)*

While this young woman obviously describes feelings of apathy, is it reasonable to characterise her as apathetic when what she is saying seems less about a “lack of interest or enthusiasm”, as the Oxford Dictionary has described apathy (Soanes, 2002, p. 33), and more about how *easy* it is to be apathetic. Is acknowledging the way the system marginalizes young people and facilitates their disengagement equivalent to apathy?

Related to McAllister’s (1998) finding, discussed in Chapter One, that there was no significant correlation between increased civic knowledge and participation, White et al. found that interest in politics was not a definitive indicator of political engagement. There was evidence of voting and not voting across the five categories of political interest, although the most committed and regular voters were those in group 5, having the highest political interest. Some young people in both of the politically uninterested groups (indifferent and cynically uninterested) had been involved in political activities like signing petitions or attending rallies. These young people seemed to get involved with issues of direct relevance to them or their community (p. 36).

White, Bruce and Ritchie make a range of recommendations for how to further encourage and nurture the political interest and engagement of young people. They conclude their report by making very similar calls to those of Australia’s Governor-General, Hugh Mackay, Beresford and Phillips, and Print et al.: “It is now time to focus attention on the role of politicians, educators and elders in engaging and representing the interests of the young.” (p. 46)



Other UK studies have found very similar results, with the 2002 *Voter Engagement and Young People* study finding levels of non-registration as high as 15 per cent in some constituencies and higher still among certain age groups and communities. Other obstacles to young people's political participation identified by the survey are also familiar: alienation from politics; apathy – not interested in politics; not knowing enough about politics; inconvenience, voting is too time consuming for example (pp. 27 – 28). We also see a link between Print et al.'s finding that young people view voting more as a right than a duty (*Voter Engagement and Young People*, 2002, p. 30). And much like Harris's comments and the arguments of Putnam (2000) and Wilkinson (1996), the report finds young people to be the vanguard of a general trend away from, and disaffection with, party politics. Young people's disconnection from mainstream political processes can be seen in that "young people were the most likely of all groups [in the survey] to actually discuss the forthcoming election with family or friends during the campaign", but were the least likely to have voted (*Voter Engagement and Young People*, 2002, p. 46).

Fahmy's (2003) research, which combined survey methods and qualitative interviews, again found young people express concerns and interest in issues that are broadly political, however they experienced politics as inaccessible. Much like Mackay's findings, the young people in Fahmy's study disliked the way politics was portrayed in the media with a focus on the personalities and scandal, and the adversarial or point scoring nature of politics itself. As with White et al. (2000), young people felt their opinions were neglected by politicians and dismissed on the grounds of their age and seen "as something they will grow out of" (Fahmy, 2003, p. 9). The technical language which marginalizes young people from politics was also often noted by participants. A lack of knowledge about politics and the idea that politics is largely irrelevant for the lives of young people were also key findings. By implication, participants often viewed politics as something they may develop an interest in as they grew older and took on the responsibilities and statuses of adulthood. Cynicism and mistrust of politicians were again prevalent themes. Conventional political participation was regularly thought to be pointless because it has little impact upon the agendas of political parties, or because

politicians and parties do not deliver on their promises, or because there was so little difference between the parties that politicians were all the same.

Fahmy argues that her findings are not consistent with notions of youth apathy, suggesting instead a position more akin to Harris, that an “engaged cynicism” is a better description of “young people’s dissatisfaction with conventional political processes” (p. 18). Fahmy’s research (like much of the UK research and all discussed so far) is another clear example of Harris’ second way of defending young people from charges of apathy; that is, research which points to compelling socio-economic reasons for young people’s disengagement and low levels of interest in politics.

In 2006 The POWER Inquiry published its Power To the People report, in which it firmly dispensed with any notion of apathy as a suitable explanation for disengagement from formal democratic politics in Britain. While it is not an inquiry specifically about young people, it is most significant that such an inquiry asserts “the British public are not apathetic.” (POWER Inquiry, 2006, p. 16) Drawing upon research that shows large numbers of citizens to be involved in community and charity work, the authors posit the apathy of the public as a “myth”. Instead of apathy being the root cause of disengagement from formal politics they argue that the institutions of politics have not kept pace with the changes in society and its citizens. Their central thesis is that the British parliamentary system reflects “an era of very limited educational provision and [one] in which deference and rigid hierarchy and static social relations were taken for granted.” (2006, p. 19) Beyond this, the party system was forged in the era of industrial society and reflects the “interests and ideological leanings of the two dominant classes that existed during the industrial era.” (2006, p. 19) In contrast, society and its citizens are now shaped by the new era of post-industrial society, where the service sector has superseded manufacturing; where many individuals enjoy and expect to make decisions for themselves rather than have them predetermined by tradition, culture or other institutions; where educational attainment has greatly increased and “individuals either lack or choose their own geographic, social and institutional bonds.” (2006, p. 103) At the same time the authors argue that post-industrial society is also characterised by the creation of a new

sector in society defined by multiple disadvantage and persistent poverty. Both of these new groups, for very different reasons, are disconnected from formal democratic politics. In short, those who have largely benefited from post-industrialisation want, indeed expect, to have more input and control over politics. They are also more focused on specific and post-material issues. While the plight and interests of those enduring persistent poverty are ignored by a party system preoccupied with the ideologies and trappings of industrial society.

Henn et al's (2002) work, briefly discussed in Chapter Three, challenges the notion that young people are apathetic and politically lazy with the finding that over half of their sample "discuss politics with their friends and family at least some of the time, if not more often." (p. 174) As with numerous other studies, the young people involved in this research consistently expressed the view that politics was not directed at young people. The authors argue that any perception of young people as disengaged from politics is a reflection of this and that young people feel politics is distant and generally irrelevant for their lives – "that politics has little *meaning* for them" (p. 175, emphasis in original). Results from survey data and the focus groups confirmed young people are interested in politics and tend to show an interest in broadly post-materialist issues (Europe, Education, Militarism and the Environment). Again, not surprisingly, the authors found a critical lack of confidence in politicians, with nearly 40 per cent of the sample disagreeing with the statement "politicians care about young people like myself" (p. 178). These views about politicians work to further position politics as remote and politicians as "*different* and whose interests and concerns are disengaged from the lived experience of young people." (p. 179) Like the findings of Print et al. (2004), respondents did show confidence in the democratic process; for example, large majorities thought it was important to vote in both national and local elections (pp. 180 – 181). Interestingly, the focus groups revealed that numerous young people felt an anticlimax after voting; thinking voting would mark an "important symbolic landmark in their transition into full citizenship", they instead felt frustrated and "somewhat disappointed with the outcomes of the process." (p. 181) Numerous young people felt "that casting their vote in an election had made, and would continue in the future to make, no difference to their lives

or to the world around them.” (p. 182) The authors also polled their sample for a range of reforms which might facilitate voting among young people and found that:

*While these reforms were generally received favourably, none of the participants appeared to believe that they were crucial for enhancing the democratic process – accessible information about the parties, the candidates and the issues was seen to be the key to improving election turnout. (Henn et al. 2002, p. 185)*

In their conclusion, Henn et al. suggest two different ways of accounting for young people’s apparent disengagement from politics, both of which (they argue) are marginalized in many studies of political participation. We saw elements of the first explanation in the work of both Ballington (2001) and White et al. (2000), which suggests young people’s disengagement reflects a cohort effect; as this generation negotiates a society characterised by risk and insecurity, they have less time for politics than older people. Henn et al. also suggest politics’ increasingly consumerist garb which engages less with people, exacerbating young people’s sense of formal politics as distant and removed from their lives. Their second explanation is one we have already encountered through the work of Harris. Henn et al.’s results lend some support for the argument that young people want a different style of politics – preferring localised and participative forms of politics focussed on immediate and some post-material issues.


Research from the UK has also found that youth participation initiatives frequently have negative affects for young people’s civic/political engagement (Fahmy, 2003; Matthews et al. 1998/9, see also Marinetto, 2003). These results are reflected in Australian findings (Print et al. 2005). Manning and Ryan argue that youth participation is typically constrained to being about ‘youth’. In the words of one participant:

*They never have youth participation on policy matters that are not youth-specific. As if young people are not affected by other policy. (p. 71)*

Returning to the UK Matthews et al. summarise the concerns regarding many youth participation initiatives:

*We have drawn attention to the dangers of tokenism, a situation when young people are apparently given a voice but have little choice about the subject, the style of communication or any say in the final outcomes. Unless young people are confident that their opinions will be treated with respect and seriousness, they will quickly become discouraged and dismiss the participation process as ineffective, with all the implications this has for their confidence in democratic processes as they grow into adulthood. We suggest that poor participatory mechanisms are very effective in training young people to become non-participants. (1998/9, p. 24)*

Findings like these posit young people's **actual engagement** as leading to disengagement, and feelings of apathy or cynicism.



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