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**School of Applied Social Studies,
University College Cork,
Ireland**

Young Activism and the Irish Democratic Paradigm: Analytical prospects

Becci Jeffers, BSocSc

Abstract

Young people are generally represented as being disinterested in conventional political practices, a belief stemming from the generation's disengagement from the democratic process. As such, the narrow focus on conventional adult-centric political practices discounts certain young people who are actively engaging in contemporary political discourses on the periphery of mainstream politics. This article addresses this challenge in two sections. Firstly, section one, considers a number of common understandings associated with young people's political (dis)engagement. It is argued that the popular representations of young people's (dis)engagement are too narrow and, therefore, limit the potential of studies in the field. The second section, breaks conceptually to an analysis of young people's political activism, a practice believed to exist outside of mainstream politics, and yet is understood as a legitimate political practice. It is argued that Bourdieu's theory of practice is a useful lens to investigate the dynamics of young people's activism, giving insight into the factors that encourage activist practice as well as the manner in which these practices are reproduced.

Keywords: Activism; Bourdieu; Engagement; Politics; Young people.

Introduction

Enduring concerns surrounding young people's political (dis)engagement have led to increased scholarly and political interest in the phenomenon. Critical questions about civic engagement, political development, citizenship status, voice and membership have been used to broaden the analytical lens of young people's democratic position in society (see for example: Furlong and Carmel, 2011; Harris, 2009; Smith *et al.*, 2007). Generally, the dominant impression held about young people is that they are removed from conventional political narratives (Harris, 2009), a belief with its unwavering origins in the decreasing turn-out of young voters. In many respects, the deficit is a matter of genuine concern, but it is problematic to assume that all young people who do not vote do not engage in politics. For instance, further studies (Furlong and Cartmel, 2011; Nilan and Threadgold, 2003) examining young people's political engagement and understanding show that there are a number of young people who are, in fact, engaged in contemporary political discourses, although they may fall outside of conventional political praxis. With the intention of addressing some conceptual limitations in understanding young people's politics, this article proposes that Bourdieu's theory of practice can provide insight into the pathways, motivations and dynamics of young activists. This article is divided into two sections. The first section addresses young people's political (dis)engagement with the aim of contextualising the dynamics of the recent scholarship and some common representations of young people. In doing so, the objective is to reinforce the call for a broader political typology within which young people's political practices can be more accurately characterised and understood. The second section explores the usefulness of Bourdieu's concepts of field and habitus alongside the species of capital as analytical lenses to reflect on young activism – a political and democratic practice. Naturally, to establish any tangible understanding in the scholarship, empirical work is required, and therefore, this article intends to provide an interpretation of the conceptual map drawn by Bourdieu, rather than any definitive empirical or theoretical claim.

Representations: Politicians, pundits and the problematic

Young people's political (dis)engagement has been subject to heated debate in contemporary academic and political circles. Frequently, the public, politicians and

pundits depict young people as unenthused by political praxis (Farthing, 2010), adding to the dense cynicism already surrounding the generation. It is believed that young people no longer recognise the significance of national politics and its consequences (Harris *et al.*, 2010; Norris, 2003; NYCI, 2009); that they have disengaged from the public and political spheres (Harris, 2009; Henn *et al.*, 2007; Print, 2007) and are marked by indifference in the face of the ‘superiority’ of conventional political institutions (Farthing, 2010). Statistically, the decreasing turnout of young voters is indeed palpable and examples of this can be seen internationally (Norris, 2003). For instance, in Britain’s general elections in 2010, 44% of the 18 – 24 year old cohort balloted in the general elections (*How Britain Voted*, 2010), which is a 7 % jump from the 2005 (Henn *et al.* 2007), but it still remains significantly lower than previous generations. In the Irish context a decline in political participation has been documented by the National Youth Council of Ireland (2009) and TASC (2007). NYCI (2009) illustrate that, at the time, only 71.2% of 18 - 25 year olds and 64% of 18-21 year olds were registered to vote. Although this trend is particularly apparent among the younger population it is, in truth, wide-ranging - evident among all age cohorts in Ireland (TASC, 2007; NYCI, 2009) and in recognised international democracies (Norris, 2003; Furlong and Cartmel, 2011; Henn *et al.*, 2007).

Understandably, political cessation is a veritable concern and could be a presage of far-reaching (mis)developments in advanced democracies. However, while many of the assertions about the deterioration of democratic processes are statistically well-founded, other studies (Harris *et al.*, 2010; Henn *et al.*, 2007; Smith *et al.* 2007) demonstrate that young people are generally interested in conventional politics and citizenship practices (e.g. the democratic process and community engagement). Despite this interest, however, many young people express that feelings of exclusion and inadequacy influence their lack of engagement. Factors such as age, class, competence (language and knowledge based), the adult-centric nature of politics and understandings of citizenship status as well as distrust, have been noted as indicators of disengagement (see for example: Coleman and Rowe, 2005; Flanagan, 2009; Harris *et al.*, 2010; Nilan and Threadgold, 2003; Smith *et al.*, 2007).

Pessimistic as this particular outlook is, it is largely accepted in the scholarship that young people are more inclined to engage in unconventional, inclusive, cause-oriented *political* practices that reflect their values (Akram, 2009; Furlong and Cartmel, 2011; Flanagan, 2009; Harris *et al.*, 2010; Shukra *et al.*, 2012). Young people are as a result “positioned paradoxically” in the “public imagination” (Harris, 2009) because of the generation’s contemporaneous apathetic and active political presence. Even though young people appear to be less likely to engage in conventional politics than their older compeers, they have played key roles in the peace movement, alter-capitalist movements (Dominguez, 2009), the environmental watershed (Edelman, 2001; Norris, 2002), and the movements resisting military occupations of Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan (Heistein, 2009; Such *et al.*, 2005; Cunningham and Lavalette, 2004), not to mention, the role young people play in community activism on a local and global scale (Heistein, 2009).

‘Citizens in the Making’: Who can be Political?

An additional representation of young people is that citizenship is their destiny or, in other words, that they are “citizens in the making” (Marshall, 1950: 25; see also: Smith *et al.* 2007). This idea conserves a “distorted vision of young people” (Farthing, 2010: 185) and their politics, legitimising social difference in society and as a consequence tapers scholarly interest through adult-centric conceptions of politics. Resultantly, the complex, or even disordered, nature of young people’s political (dis)engagement has a tendency to fall in line with popular dualisms. One such dualism, other than *engaged* and *disengaged*, used to decipher young people’s political practices is the *Political* and *political* paradigm. The *P/political* symmetry are one way of defining the difference between State organised *Politics* and citizen mobilised *politics*. It has been soundly critiqued in an analysis by Skelton (2009), in which she argues that young people are often examined in relation to *Political* practices from which they are largely absent. She explains that *Political* practices are most frequently understood as “‘formal’, ‘public’, ‘institutional’ or ‘macro-’ politics” (Skelton, 2009: 147). However, the realms of “‘informal’, ‘personal’, ‘micro-’ political practices that relate to ‘participation’” (Skelton, 2009: 147), in other words, *political* practices, tend to be the ones in which young people engage. Skelton contends that a blended version would provide a superior and less contradictory understanding of young people’s politics. This thought is well aligned with the call

for a broader typology of participation lobbied for by many scholars in the field (O'Toole *et al.*, 2003; Farthing, 2010; Heistein, 2009; Skelton, 2009).

To talk about *political* practices, is to talk about some of the greatest human achievements. Although, change is often passed through institutional settings, the expanses of social and political history are defined by fruitful (and less fruitful) *political* citizen engagements. Indeed, the abolition of slavery, the overthrowing of dictators, progressions in women's rights, the right to welfare, labour rights, the right to organise and the progress in defining the rights of children have had a discernible impact on many societies. These achievements came about through the efforts of mobilisations challenging injustices and deep-seated norms (Moyer, 2001). In Ireland, we are surrounded by young people engaging in efforts to change social conditions, at the forefront of social change and the transitional nature of youth implies change in itself. As Erikson (quoted in Kirshner, 2007: 367) noted:

[I]n youth the tables of childhood dependence begin slowly to turn: no longer is it merely for the old to teach the young the meaning of life. It is the young who, by their responses and actions, tell the old whether life as represented to them has some vital promise, and it is the young who carry in them the power to confirm those who confirm them, to renew and regenerate, to disavow what is rotten, to reform and rebel.

Overall, the unfolding of history suggests that young people, as well as their adult counterparts, have the potential to influence social and political change in a socially just way (Checkoway *et al.*, 2003; Kirshner, 2007).

It would be naïve to assume that *P/political* activities account for all young people and that all young people, in one way or another, participate in and are interested in these political practices. Harris *et al.* (2010) discuss the idea that certain young people's engagement takes 'everyday', explorative, and 'subcultural' forms, which represent their attempts to come to terms with contemporary political ideas. This can be recognised in symbolic representations in music (for instance, listening to *The Roots* or *Rage Against the Machine*). In many respects, political participation is heterogeneous and entails a variety of possibilities. By moving past the current astigmatic obsession with adult-centred conventional *Politics* and the miasma of

polarised debates, there is potential in the discipline to recognise meaning in young people's engagement in and reinvention of politics.

Conceptualising Young People's Activism

It is necessary at this point return to the original purpose of this paper - the conceptualisation and analysis of young people's activism, acknowledging activism as a legitimate political practice that reflects elements of democratic life. The features of activism referred to here are those that fall into the *political* narrative, implying actions conducted by young people with political and social change implications. That is to say, the organised efforts of young people to promote or resist change in the context of social, political, environmental or policy development outside of institutional fora. Drawing on Sparks's (1997) conceptualisation of dissident citizenship, a number of elements should be present in this conceptualisation. It is, firstly, necessary to see activism as a multiplicity of everyday, organisational and discursive actions that supplant or interact with institutionalised democratic customs. Secondly, the uninstitutionalised actions of young activists can be shaped by institutional, social and material contexts. Thirdly, democratic interactions and struggles, whether they are antagonistic or otherwise, can be practiced by members of differing social groups. Lastly, ideas and discourses influencing and shaping young people's activism, especially discourses about citizenship, democracy and justice are important to understand a young activist's agency.

How can this outline help us understand more clearly the dynamics of young people's activism - the choices they make, the experiences they have and their entry into the activist ghetto? To begin with, it encourages us to note variety within and between activist groups, from the most wide-reaching level, revolutionary, reformist or reactionary causes – to a micro analysis of collectives and even individuals within activist groups. As individuals, a useful (although heavily critiqued) way to think about an activist is as a specialist or an expert in social change. To think of yourself as being an activist means to think of yourself as being somehow privileged or more advanced than others in your appreciation of the need for social change, in the knowledge of how to achieve it and as leading or being in the forefront of the practical struggle to create this change (Andrew X, 2001: 1). Certainly, activists enter the field with knowledge, experience and purpose, working toward a goal, but they do

not do this without struggle and can indeed reproduce structures they intend to overcome. To frame these dynamics of young people's activism, the below discussion will consider Bourdieu's theory of practice. Initially, however, an insight into Bourdieu's theory of practice is called for. And so, in a brief and somewhat simplistic summary, Bourdieu was primarily concerned with the reproduction of structures of domination in society (Bourdieu, 2012 [1977]; 2010 [1986]; see also Webb et al., 2008). His works (Bourdieu, 2012; 2010; 1990) consider the ways in which human behaviour reproduces powerful structures and the ways in which these structures are internalised by individuals and groups, who, in turn, reproduce them. The social world, according to Bourdieu, is characterised by distinct fields (e.g. political, educational, medical), each field has its own specific rules (or doxa) and similarly disposed participants. The concepts of field, habitus and capital (social, cultural, economic) are in constant interplay, one presupposing the other and reproduce structures and practices (Crossley, 2002). As such, specific social relations in a field are structured and constituted by different forms and amounts of capital (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Applying the Bourdieusian concepts of field, capital and habitus is a way to at least begin to address some problems arising from under theorised assumptions on the ways in which young people engage with politics.

Pathways and Motivations: Young People's Political Agency

Logically, given that some young people and not all young people are engaged in activist groups, the assumption can be made that some young people have a higher propensity to engage in activism as a result of their 'habitus'. Habitus, in this case, is best understood as the structured disposition or tendency (Bourdieu, 2012; 2010; 1990) of a person or group. A key concept, habitus transcends structure and agency explaining their shared role in their own reproduction. As an analytical tool, it explains the manner in which human dispositions are structured by social environment, capital accumulation and learned 'know-how' (Webb et al., 2008), which determine, in this context, young activist practice. Under the scope of Bourdieu's lens, a young person's decision to engage in activism is, therefore, not strictly governed by them or any other person. Rather, young activists are predisposed to act in a particular way as a result of their own *subjective expectations* arising from childhood experiences and interactions with the social world that compel

their decisions, actions and *objective possibilities* (Bourdieu, 1990; see also: Webb *et al.*, 2008).

In an ethnographic study in Canada, Kennelly (2009a; 2009b) shows that young people (between the ages of 18 - 29) from white, middle-class, left-leaning families were most likely to join and engage with activist groups (specifically, the anti-poverty and alter-globalisation movements). Of course, this could be fallacious - perhaps this cohort is simply more inclined to participate in research studies than young people from other social milieu. Nonetheless, it is assumed that certain young people feel at ease entering activist groups, demonstrating what Kennelly (2009a) refers to as an 'activist habitus'. In a similar way to Kennelly (2009a; 2009b), Crossley (2002; 2003) conceives of a radical and resistance habitus, arguing that it reproduces the structures within movements. Equally, and like Kennelly's (2009a; 2009b) 'activist habitus', Crossley's conception of habitus is not bound up in any particular movement. Nonetheless, the young activists in Kennelly's work espouse particular ideological positions - the majority of the protest groups being radically left or left of centre.

The idea that an 'activist habitus' only develops among the political left is certainly problematic - activism occurs across a spectrum of political beliefs. The 'activist habitus' does, however, imply a particular kind of alternative political engagement and provides a lens from which researchers can analyse activism. Activist practices traversing ideology suggest the existence of certain predispositions to value and practice politics alternatively. That is to say that, although young pro-choice and pro-life activists do not share the same beliefs they are similarly disposed to engage in activism and direct actions. It is these micro-inclinations, to engage or agitate, and their origins that need further examination and Bourdieu's theorising can provide a useful frame for such an analysis. In general, the decisions of young activists to mobilise around causes can be explored in relation to relative similarities in their habitus, social space, interests and capital. These elements, alongside empirical work, can assist in the conceptualisation of the variables that impact upon young activist decisions, practices and pathways to action resulting from the objective structures in which the develop.

Dynamics of the Field of Activism: Exclusionary and Inclusionary factors

A number of scholars including Crossley (2002; 2003; see also Bilić, 2010), Kennelly (2009a; 2009b) and Husu (2012) have allocated and conceptualised their analyses of social movements and activism within the notion of field. Jensen (2006: 266) designates three criteria to recognise a field:

1. It must be possible to point out differentiated agents positioned in relatively stable relations (of power) with each other.
2. The field must have a certain amount of autonomy.
3. It must be possible to demonstrate the existence of – or maybe more precisely demonstrate the effect of the existence of – a form of capital which is specific to the field.

In her study on young racialised, working-class men in Denmark, Jensen (2006) stresses the importance of a field having a relatively stable hierarchical social formation. Arguably, a misconception can arise, in assuming that, because young activists may share a similar habitus or disposition, they lose their heterogeneity. Granting, young activists may be similarly inclined to engage in activist politics, however, they bring different amounts and types of capital to the field, impacting upon the relationships within the group and their position-takings. Even within the leaderless movements of 2011 a certain amount of stratification took place. Kanna (2012: 152) illustrates this by saying:

[T]he alleged novelty of the Occupy Movements ends up marginalizing the long, continuous, and arduous path of reform and radicalism blazed by minority and working-class activists, in turn privileging the voices and positions of middle-class, white actors.

Differences, relationships and position-takings like this can be effectively analysed within the concept of field. Take, for instance, Freeman's *Tyranny of Structurelessness* (2000), a piece that argues against claims made by certain feminist groups in the 1970s of non-hierarchical practice. Freeman, argues that there were clear criteria for inclusion and exclusion, as well as distinct power constellations, based on who the women were, who they were friendly with and what they did outside of the organisation. There was a clear split between insiders and outsiders in the group. In the works of Kennelly (2009a; 2009b) we see another example - a number of implicit

exclusionary factors in the Canadian anti-poverty, alter-globalisation and social justice movements. Her works demonstrate the impact of activist performances (fashion and taste) and capital (education) as factors which determine the extent to which the young people feel included as activists. Let us explore these ideas under Bourdieu's lens.

The fashionable belief that social capital is currently subject to fragmentation (Henn *et al.*, 2007) within the rational choice tradition of Putnam, can be put to better use from a Bourdieusian perspective. Anxiety surrounding the decline in social capital and its impact on democracy has framed analyses on young people's disengagement from politics. Consequently, these studies fail to adequately address the role social capital plays in reproducing structures in society (Blaxter and Hughes, 2007). Engaging with the notion that social capital is a resource that benefits some people more than others, could establish a fruitful investigation. For example, some young activists may have direct advantages on entering a group as a result of their social networks. Having activist friends or an activist family means that some young people are likely to possess a great deal of social capital in the field of activism - specific activist circles may already be familiar to them as a result. The ease at which well networked young people access the field in comparison to other young people, could mean that activism is, in fact, not an equal playing field for all young people. Bourdieu (1998) also provides an account of social bonds, solidarity and trust (see: Bourdieu, 2012), allowing researchers to explore the diverse social relationships and networks in activist groups.

Other than the particular networks of friends and colleagues that come into being within activist groups (social capital), a number of other forms of capital are deemed to be at play. Specific forms of knowledge (cultural capital) and the material differences between members can work to determine the positions taken and decisions made by young activists. Despite activism's position outside of what is considered the mainstream political field, in respect to the *P/political* binary, a species of capital is evident that aids in reproducing powerful structures and cultures within activist groups. The capital accumulated by young people inside and outside of a field of activism can lead to the development of arbitrary disparities between its members. For instance, those who engage in forms of direct action in order to resist an assault

on the values the group are attempting to endorse may be awarded prestige, status or social recognition (symbolic capital). In another way, a young activist with a degree in the social, political or journalistic fields, can use their capital (the degree) to actively work against the struggles a group may have in the courts, parliament or media eye (Crossley, 2002) – generating a symbolic form of capital such as stature amongst other members. This idea opens up further prospects of an analysis of power constellations in activist groups.

Conclusion

A persistent decline in democratic activity is a serious social concern (Norris, 2003) and therefore studies into (dis)engagement are necessary and likely to continue. In spite of this fact, this article intended to propose that, despite popular opinion, certain young people are engaged in politics even if it is considered to exist outside of the mainstream. Through their engagement in a variety of practices they can engage with the contemporary political milieu, express their values and, in doing so, contest the very nature of what is considered political. Social networks in and between activist groups are almost tangible (see: Crossley and Ibrahim (2012) regarding ‘critical mass’), many activist circles are tied together by social networks through which information is passed (Kennelly, 2009a; 2009b). Those who engage in activism, do so with specific knowledge, intentions, experience and capitals, which can be used in the practical struggles associated with activism. Arguably, the idea that some young people, by virtue of their experience of the social world, are disposed to engage in activist practices (Kennelly, 2009a; 2009b) indicates the existence of an activist habitus (Crossley, 2002). By making this conceptual break, guided by an understanding of young people’s *political* activism, research can draw out the noninstitutionalised democratic praxis and the practical struggles in which young activists engage. With Bourdieu’s conceptual map there is potential to see beyond activism as a *political* practice and to develop an understanding of a distinct politics of young people’s activism. Naturally, empirical work is necessary to interpret the factors that dispose a young person to engage in activism, an activity that reflects the dynamics of the social world. Nonetheless, a meaningful application of field, habitus and capital can assist in theorising and explaining factors that unite diverse young activists involved in the endless pursuit of social change.

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