The trouble with civic: a snapshot of young people’s civic and political engagements in twenty-first-century democracies

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In much academic and policy literature about civic engagement, regardless of their political or social circumstances, youth across the globe are enjoined to engage in all the activities thought good for them in order to qualify for the moral label ‘good citizens’. Voting, watching the news, party activism, sending emails to government websites, attending meetings in the town hall, volunteering, or addressing envelopes for civic organisations are examples of the kinds of activities most often highlighted. In this discourse, distrust and dissatisfaction, however legitimate, as well as group anger, cynicism and unsanctioned protest, are seen as being in conflict with proper ‘civic pathways’. The ‘political’ is primarily configured as pertaining to elections and government, and civic is the implicitly pro-social and conformist field within which future citizens are educated for political engagement. By the same token, when it is not straightforwardly about a ‘passport’ which represents a set of rights and duties, citizenship appears to become a kind of etiquette, whereby ‘members’ communicate with their ‘elected representatives’ and regardless of the outcome of their interest and action, continue to be motivated and interested in the actions of ‘their’ government. But how do such academic and policy conceptualisations of ‘the good citizen’ and ‘civic action’ map onto the real lives of young people? Based on a case study of responses to young people’s activism following the start of the 2003 war in Iraq, as well as on the initial findings of the European project about young people, civic participation and the internet, Civicweb, running from 2006 to 2009, this paper engages speculatively with questions such as the following. What kinds of political actions are in fact being encouraged by those who complain that youth are in deficit when it comes to the political and civic realm and, in contrast, what are young people doing in this realm? Is all ‘civic action’ necessarily benign and desirable, or is it merely constructed in this normative manner rhetorically, in order to emphasise an ideal or pro-social version of democratic citizenship? And, more controversially, could apathy, a refusal to vote, civil disobedience, and/or mass resistance to government policies be more democratic alternatives than state-sanctioned or authoritarian ‘civic’ action?

Keywords: civic participation; citizenship; young people; right-wing activism; Civicweb

Introduction

The idea that young people are disengaged from politics and civil society, indeed from the entire public sphere – through no fault of their own or systemic constraints, or because of something that typifies that particular age-group – has become something of a mantra now in this field, and it is almost unthinkable not to state it at least in passing at the beginning of books, articles or funding proposals. My current project, Civicweb: Young People, the

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Internet and Civic Engagement, is no exception. Indeed, in the last two decades alone, hundreds of papers, books and reports in diverse fields have been written with the aim of delineating what civic participation should be, why citizens in general and young people in particular are failing in terms of civic participation (particularly voting), and how these trends should be prevented. Meanwhile, other analyses of this topic set out with the intention of challenging the orthodoxy and conclude by finding in young people a vibrant stratum of the population that is outstripping older peers in terms of innovative democratic engagement. Acknowledging the recurrent fault lines between different stances on young people and civic culture, Lance Bennett even writes of ‘two different paradigms that contrast young citizens ... as either reasonably active and engaged or relatively passive and disengaged’ (2008, p. 2). His carefully balanced discussion proceeds in an attempt to describe and bridge the oppositions he has identified.

Taking its cue from some of the empirical and theoretical concerns outlined, but coming at the issues from a different angle, this article is speculative in outlook and aims to raise questions with regard to three aspects of current discourse. Initially, drawing on the findings of my recent research into youth civic activity represented on civic websites for the project Civicweb, it aims to question both the notion that young people are the least civically engaged section of society regardless of context and the idea that they are outstripping older generations in the creativity and extent of their civic engagement online. Second, in the context of questions about the necessary and actual relationships between civic engagement, action, and political or governmental reaction in the wake of the 2003 UK and US-led attack on Iraq, it aims to problematise the notion that voting in elections, support for a political party, and trust in government are always worthy indicators of young people’s democratic civic engagement. And third, but central to the whole article, the aim here is to raise questions about the idea that civic and political engagement and action are necessarily benign and democratic and hence always desirable goals for young people. To historicise these discussions, the next section takes a brief and partial look at some of the rhetorical trends with regard to citizenship and participation in the UK.

From rights to duties: the civic imperative

Why has the idea of youth apathy and citizen disengagement been the focus of such attention in recent years? While, as Kathy Edwards (2007) points out, in discussions of trends in Western democracies, young people are castigated for not turning out in huge numbers to vote, low voter turnout is a phenomenon that affects other age groups too and so age cannot be the only explanation. The notion of citizenship itself has a complex and individual history in the twentieth century in the UK, as in other countries, and as Ruth Lister explains (1998, pp. 310/311), has tended to move in historical waves that establish different balances between individualistic and communitarian, rights-based and duty-led outlooks. The common thread between different waves has been a reluctance to differentiate between the relationships of different categories or groups of citizens to each other and to the state. This is the case even with trends in the 1990s, which saw New Labour attempting to bridge gaps between people’s experiences of life in communities and their assumed aspirations for individual advancement: ‘Tony Blair’s first exposition of the meaning of socialism (or social-ism as he chose to recast it), on taking up the leadership of the party, set out his interpretation of the ‘Left view of citizenship’ and included ‘the equal worth of each citizen’ as one of the values of democratic socialism’ (Lister 1998, p. 312). Lister suggests, furthermore, that when it comes to a range of ‘Big Ideas’ offered by the New Labour government in the 1990s, few were as embedded in the language of citizenship
as that of ‘community’. Indeed, she notes that in referring to ‘community’ the vocabulary was one of ‘responsibility and obligation’. This, she argues, reflects the influence on New Labour both of popular communitarianism, as expounded by Amitai Etzioni and David Selbourne, and of a British tradition of ethical Christian socialism. It is an expression of what David Marquand (1996) has called ‘a new kind of moral collectivism’ on the centre-left. . . . The statement of values, which replaced the totemic Clause IV of the party’s constitution, offers a new ideal of a ‘community . . . where the rights we enjoy reflect the duties we owe’, a formulation which implies that duties exist morally and logically prior to rights. This New Labour mantra echoes the deployment of the language of citizenship obligation by Conservative ministers in the 1980s. It also reflects a more deep-rooted paradigm shift in which the discourse of citizenship draws increasingly upon the lexicon of obligations rather than rights. (Lister 1998, p. 313)

Lister’s article proceeds to examine discourses critical of the foregoing, and also the ways in which such communitarian rhetoric, whether in the UK or vis-à-vis Europe, might play out in terms of the citizen identities and day-to-day experiences of working women. We may surmise here, however, how the gradually increasing orientation of public/governmental discourses on citizenship towards a notion of morally conscious citizens, aware of their rights and shouldering the duties that supposedly bind them together into communities, might play out in relation to groups such as young people.

Lister’s overview provides a backdrop that indicates the ways in which the choice to keep any sort of distance from those avowedly working to fulfil the vision of a united community of Great Britain (or any other nation state with a similar recent history, for that matter) might be interpreted as, or translated into, a rhetoric about disengagement, apathy and depoliticisation. Quite evidently, there are fewer people under the age of 25 in positions of power in government or with access to government than there are 26–60-year-olds. Further, it could be argued that the dismantling of manufacturing industries (begun under the Thatcher government, continued by successive Blair governments), the undermining of trade unionism and the rights of public-sector workers, and the failure of radical Left politics to captivate or convince a broad spectrum of the UK population have left a kind of vacuum in politics, meaning that there are no easily available, inviting and evidently effective alternatives to established parties and politicians for young people to turn to. Indeed, a number of young people do express boredom or lack of interest (Coleman and Rowe 2005, p. 8), cynicism (Buckingham 2000), and/or mistrust (Cushion 2007a) in relation to politicians, political parties and government. Reminding us that young people’s lives are cross-cut by social factors, some youth (who may be identified by their self-descriptions, language, and/or educational qualifications as middle- or upper-middle class) contributing comments to the websites of the Liberal Democrats, Labour and the Conservative Party or the UK Youth Parliament, themselves subscribe to the sorts of individualist or communitarian rhetoric previously described. In our recent report across six European countries and Turkey (Civicweb, deliverable 6), the trend was for young people to be more suspicious of and unlikely to trust government and formal politics than some older people, and in some instances, there was a growing disaffection from electoral politics in sections of the population other than but also including youth. But does this add up to the kind of overwhelming lack of interest in a broader politics and civil society that has frequently been attributed to them? The next section looks briefly at some of the ways in which UK youth appear to be engaging in the public sphere, especially as it is manifested on the internet.
While the benevolent and democratic nature of civic participation is rarely questioned (see next section), in more recent academic writing there are more specific theoretical debates being played out about government, participation and the potential or actual uses of new technologies for enhancing youth engagement. Montgomery et al. (2004) and Dahlgren (2006) have carried out descriptive studies that examine in particular the offerings of civic websites for young people in the United States and Sweden respectively. Anita Harris (2004) sees traditional political participation as being as much about politicians and the establishment as about the behaviour or values of young people, and Stephen Coleman (2001, 2005) uses young people's own responses to examine new technologies of mixing and digital cultures for methods of communicating politically that resonate with young people. Sonia Livingstone (Livingstone et al. 2005) and Neil Selwyn (2007), meanwhile, examine critically some minutiae of the digital civic and political communication occurring for young people on the internet, testing hypotheses about changes in communication practices and social engagement wrought by technological developments. What these theorists share, however, is a concern that young people should be represented positively, or at least accurately and fairly, in terms of their civic participation, whether it be on- or off-line

The extended report on which this section draws (Civicweb deliverable 6) presents a descriptive and analytical summary of the findings of a survey of online civic initiatives available to young people in the UK and six other countries. In the UK, while background information was gathered between September and December 2006 on approximately 500 UK civic sites, the survey, which consisted of an online template filled in by the researcher about each site, was carried out between January and June 2007 and included 80 websites. Of the 80 sites surveyed, 35 (approximately 44%) are civic and/or political sites aimed at the adult population more generally, but certainly not explicitly excluding users aged 18–25 or even younger. Of the 80 sites surveyed, 45 (approximately 56%) are targeted specifically at youth and purport to be designed with young people in mind. The intention of the report was not to provide an exhaustive overview of every aspect of UK civic and political sites for youth but to give a sense of the range of civic content available to young people online. While the sample in this section has been chosen to provide an illustrative snapshot of the findings of the survey, it does not and cannot claim to be representative of all online civic content for UK youth or of all the complex findings in the report.

With regard to methodology, the websites in this study were identified in a number of ways: initially by word of mouth from other researchers and based on obvious factors such as prominent civic and/or youth organisations in the UK; by clicking on the links sections of each website visited; by going to particular activist portals or the reference sections of other similar research projects; and by entering search terms into commercial search engines. Filling in the online template involved the following steps:

1. clicking on and reading content on all the main page options (such as ‘about us’, ‘campaigns’, ‘FAQs’, ‘get involved’, forums, links, etc.);
2. clicking on every category of topic on each page opened (for instance, ‘climate change’, ‘prisoner support’, ‘getting started in the forum’, ‘carer advice’, ‘history of anarchism’);
3. clicking on at least three examples of specific options within each theme page (particular posts in the forums, particular examples of the offers in ‘ethical advertising’, particular responses to readers’ questions, particular endorsements or calls to action on specific issues, etc.);
4. clicking on all hyperlinked visual items on the ‘home page’, ‘about us’, ‘get involved’ and ‘campaigns’ pages;
5. clicking on and scanning a selection of hyperlinked newspaper reports and official documents;
6. clicking on and using accessibility options to test the site’s disability awareness;
7. clicking on privacy policies and ‘contact us’ options;
8. clicking on video footage and other language options if any;
9. following instructions for making posts and navigating back and forth between pages, hyperlinks and options to test the site’s usability;
10. clicking on at least 50% of the external links listed on the site.

Discussion and analysis of the data collected were undertaken by qualitative questions ranging from the role of the sites in the organisations’ strategies, and the sites’ representations of democracy, civic culture and politics, to the ideological and pedagogic frameworks of the organisations as revealed in their language, conception of the audience, and relationship to traditional governmental politics.

From comments by young people themselves on the websites visited, and by producers of the websites during in-depth interviews (Civicweb deliverable 13, forthcoming), it is possible to conjecture that a section of people in the 15–25 age group are as keen to have their voices heard on a number of civic topics as their older peers, and in some cases are willing to give up significant amounts of time to campaigning. This supports evidence from a number of reports (Carnegie Young People’s Initiative 2001, White et al. 2000, Coleman and Rowe 2005, Roker and Cox 2005). It does not indicate, however, that there are significantly more or different groups of young people engaging in civic activity online than there are off-line or that they are all doing so in isolation from older adults. The environment, social discrimination, children’s rights, war, terrorism, school and pedagogy, students’ rights, employment and justice systems, global corporations and campaigns for sustainable development, sexuality, eating disorders, bullying and sexual abuse – these are just some of the topics about which young people are engaging in heated debate and campaigning on- and off-line across the UK. How they do this varies, just as the funding models and pedagogies of the websites vary, and many of the campaigns have a primarily off-line civic action base – from local, national and global meetings and networks both Left and Right leaning, demonstrations, and lobbies of parliament to direct action in relation to animal rights, human rights, pro- and anti-hunting, strikes and pickets. But how do these activities link up with more traditional forms of politics such as orientations towards government and voting?

A spectrum of views about the civic sphere and the political sphere, as well as about civic and political action, emerge from the civic websites and organisations surveyed. At one end are those organisations that are comfortable with and/or generally supportive of the (UK) government as it runs at present, with the parliamentary system (in the UK), and with what they consider to be the democratic institutions of this country, although they can see opportunities to make things run more effectively or more smoothly for some groups of people, notably young Black people, young people in general, and those from ‘deprived’ areas. For these sites, and especially the ones aimed at youth, their role is to provide a platform and/or the training and motivation for young people, who are seen to be too cut off from formal politics to become interested in the parliamentary system, in voting in elections, or in debating the views of politicians. Others simply want to canvass support for a particular party. Slightly more radical sites in this category see young people as being excluded by current debates. These aim to increase politicians’ awareness of and
responsiveness to the views of youth. The Hansard Society’s HeadsUp site (Figure 1) typifies this approach. Some local government sites in this category take this slightly further by actually providing off-line resources for youth and reasons for them to get involved in their communities (Figure 2). By the evidence of the site producers, however, the numbers who actually take up this offer or to whom it is made available are small (Civicweb deliverable 13 forthcoming).

Figure 1. HeadsUp Forum Page, July 2007.

Figure 2. B-Involved, the ‘young advisors’ to the ‘Young Mayor’ of Lewisham.
Located centrally along the spectrum are websites belonging to organisations both for youth and for a wider public which believe that while the ideal of elected parliamentary democracy is good, there are large gaps between promises and what actually happens, with a number of people who are not getting basic human rights, let alone the full array of rights promised to British citizens. These sites invite the involvement of young people in campaigns against torture, for instance, or child labour, and in doing so provide them with implicitly political information about the world and how power and the social order work (Figure 3). They also view it as necessary for civic and political participation to be premised on high levels of knowledge about, discussion of, and critique of both historical and current events, and social practices and policies (see, for instance, http://www.muslimyouth.net). Also centrally located on this civic-political spectrum are sites and organisations that pursue advocacy at the highest levels for particular minority group rights but do not exhort young people to more widespread systemic social critique.

Finally, there are a number of youth websites for organisations whose rhetoric and invitations to political activity are clearly antistate and anticapitalist (http://www.socialiststudents.org.uk; http://www.studentsgainswetshops.org.uk; http://www.uksac.revolt.org) or occasionally xenophobic and ethnic supremacist (http://youth.bnp.org.uk/). On these sites, civic participation for young people at its most basic level is perceived as a matter of the sceptical and critical decoding of mass media ‘messages’ and government rhetoric; running alternative media on- or off-line, leafleting and doing graffiti; and challenging prejudice and injustice or the democratic process itself by calling demonstrations, sit-ins, strikes, pickets, petitions, boycotts and discussion meetings. A small but significant number of radical sites view such actions as part of traditional politics and advocate in addition ‘direct action’, including a range of actions such as repeatedly breaking ‘unjust’ copyright laws by file-sharing, using only ‘free’ software, heckling parliamentarians, chaining wheelchairs to disabled-unfriendly thoroughfares, lying down in the road in front of
army bases, releasing animals destined for slaughterhouses, beating up Pakistani shopkeepers, preventing animal-testing facilities from carrying out their work, doing homophobic graffiti, or physically preventing the hunting of animals. Clearly, not all of these actions are comparable, and some are not in the least democratic; nevertheless, their advocates on the sites view them as civic or political action. Unusually for the online Left groups, the British Antifascist Network implicitly regards violent action against neo-Nazis and far Right cadre (‘Bash the Fash’) as a clear aspect of civic/political action. Evangelical Christian youth groups meanwhile invite users to get ‘sports contests’ and ‘arts or drama’ activities going with youth in ‘deprived areas’, and to have ‘clinics’ to try to solve youth problems, but always with the codicil that these activities will be used as a means of ‘spreading God’s word’ and ‘bringing Jesus’ to those who need him.

While rhetoric and pedagogy may differ between youth-led organisations and those run by older adults, in the online civic sphere surveyed here and the off-line civic sphere it frequently represents, young people in the UK appear to match older peers in desire to communicate, research, debate, inform, suggest ideas, raise funds, protest and volunteer their time to particular causes and actions. Again, there is no evidence to suggest that all young people in the UK are engaged in civic debate and action any more than there is to suggest that all adults are involved in this manner. The dominant tone in writing about young people and civic engagement across different fields, including that of participation and new technologies, however, continues to be one that sees civic engagement under any circumstances as an unquestionable good, civic action as even better, and almost as a logical corollary, young people as being troublingly in deficit when it comes to civic participation (Putnam 2000, Coughlan 2003, Galston 2004). While significant critiques have suggested that young people may not be as in deficit in this area as has been thought (see, for instance, Norris 2002), the generally democratic outcomes of civic action remain almost taken for granted. But this assumption, as well as the polarisation of the debate between those critical of youth ‘apathy’ and those defending youth, might be distracting attention from ongoing problems in particular civic and political contexts. The next section takes the case of the UK protests over the attack on Iraq in 2003 and suggests that making young people’s assumed lack of interest or engagement out to be one of the biggest problems faced by democracies might be a dangerous precedent for the very democracies such arguments hope to infuse with new life.

Who’s responsible for the health of democracy? Young citizens versus the state

More than adults, young people seem intuitively to recognize that our political system is broken. And they register their awareness on Election Day by not bothering to participate in what to them is a pretty meaningless exercise. So when you see the low numbers for voter turnout this time, don’t think of it as apathy. Think of it as the wisdom of youth. (Hill and Robinson 2002)

Even if those who suggest that all engagement and action are ‘good’ things are envisaging ‘benevolent’ action and ‘pro-democratic’ engagement and democratic government, there are plenty of examples of political or civic outcomes that have conflicting and potentially undemocratic overtones for some people while being unquestionably democratic to others. Let us take what happened over the Iraq war as a case in point, as it ‘engaged’ record numbers of people, and young people among them (Cushion 2004, 2007, 2007a). The sense of anger and frustration about an impending invasion of another country was framed both in terms of justice issues and in terms of legality. Although it led some two million people
to protest both verbally and physically at various locations across the UK from February 2003 onwards and deepened over the course of the following months, the sense of political efficacy engendered by these collective actions appears to have been short-lived. There is evidence that various groups and individuals became increasingly disenchanted by both the official sanctions taken against them as groups (Baty 2003) or individuals (Smith 2003) and by the long-term effects of the government’s propaganda and lack of responsiveness to the arguments and actions against the war (Al-Ghabban 2007, Cushion 2007a, Noor 2007).

Of the young people who chose to take civic action by walking out of schools during lessons, or colleges during lectures – and there were some 10,000 of these in London alone on the day that the Blair government alongside other US allies began the attack on Iraq – many found themselves facing exceptionally serious and authoritarian consequences the following day and even on the day of the invasion itself (Al-Ghabban 2004, Cushion 2004). Some schools locked their gates, others sent warning letters home to parents preceding the events, and yet others carried out exclusions or suspensions following the events (Smith 2003, Dibben 2004). According to Cunningham and Lavalette (2004), ‘the overwhelming response of the educational establishment was to castigate and punish’ those who took part in the school ‘strikes’ against the war. Of the young people and adults who chose to write letters to their MPs, many received formal replies stating the government’s position on weapons of mass destruction at the time, or a formulaic note directing them to the text of a speech by the then Prime Minister Tony Blair justifying military action against Iraq. For some, this did not constitute reciprocal engagement on the part of their elected representatives. One young protestor, 18-year-old Neela Dolezalova, who walked out of a Hampstead comprehensive to join demonstrations, is quoted in a national newspaper as saying:

Everyone was determined to find a channel for the outrage they felt about the war. I realised that although this student peace movement is young and inexperienced, it is passionate, diverse and creative. Suddenly the politicisation of youth looks unattractive to those who have called us apathetic for too long. (Guardian, 22 March 2003, quoted in Smith 2003)

Her response shows optimism about the youth civic action occurring but the sense of a double standard in some official/adult responses to particular instances of civic action. Meanwhile, a media environment seemingly supportive of young people’s interest in the developing international situation prior to the attack on Iraq, became increasingly strident in its caricatures of the efforts of young citizens to oppose their government following the attack on Iraq. As Stephen Cushion notes, ‘the dominant media frame shifted, once the war had commenced, with young protestors portrayed as opportunistic truants rather than (as pre-war) active, engaged citizens’ (2007, abstract).

Thus undermined, the civic actions discussed could not prevent the initial attacks, which precipitated the now well-documented military and paramilitary destruction of cities, towns and infrastructure across Iraq. Conservative estimates (http://www.iraqbodycount.org; Burnham et al. 2006) suggest that at least 100,000 Iraqi civilians who would not otherwise have died have done so between 2003 and 2008. Equally worryingly for those interested in strengthening global civil society, the erosion by invading armed forces and local paramilitary militia of the nominal law and order that previously existed in Iraq has rendered Iraqi civil society weaker than it was a decade ago (McLaren and Jaramillo 2003). While mortality rates have risen across Iraq, the threat of daily kidnapping and physical violence, as well as the legal encoding of religious as opposed to secular practice, has had a particularly debilitating effect on women’s daily participation in jobs and education (Coleman 2006).
There is no implication here that the civic and political protests should not have happened or that the kind of engaged campaigning experience they gave young people in the UK was not useful. Protests that are not listened to are most evidently still civic and as such play an important role in a democracy. Nor is this an argument suggesting that all governments should change democratically decided policies based solely on strong public sentiments. It does suggest, however, that in some contexts the publicity given to relatively mild forms of civic action – including demonstrating peacefully and writing letters – which are tolerated by many governments, may sometimes serve to mask undemocratic policies, persistent injustice and inequality, or abuses of power. To be more specific, if these civic actions run counter to the wishes of the regime in power, and if young people or others participating in civic protest are arguing that the actions of that regime be rethought, curtailed or prevented entirely (as was the case with many of the protests that erupted or were planned to attempt to prevent the attack on Iraq in 2003), they are often unable to achieve any significant social or political objectives (Such et al. 2005).

So, it is important to examine the role the anti-Iraq war protests, particularly the contribution of young people, played in the political situation at the time. First, despite the incontrovertibly aggressive intervention of the British in Iraq, it is possible that these protests limited the options of the then government in terms of the military aid it would render the United States. Second, and equally important, it is possible that the civic protests did cause some sections of the British media establishment to represent the plight of Iraqi civilians in a more balanced and humane manner. Some argue, however, that the civic debates and actions taking place also served to strengthen the opinion that the UK establishment (and many of its more privileged citizens) has of the UK as a particularly open democracy compared to other places where citizens are not allowed to demonstrate, complain about the government in newspaper articles, or write letters to elected members of Parliament. Meanwhile real problems with this particular democracy are seen to be passing mostly unchallenged (Cushion 2007a). There is evidence to support the truth of both the former positive outcomes of the antiwar civic actions, particularly for some young people’s sense of agency in the public sphere (Mead 2004), and the latter sense of the need for a broader accountability from governing elites.

Although there are community forms of unionism being revived in particular cases (Wills 2001), spontaneous cross-union strikes and pickets have been banned in this country, and many young people do not know that their parents had this right. Some of the social services that used to be available to all – dental care, higher education – have been reduced and privatised, while the negative experiences of ethnic minority citizens under antiterrorism legislation have been well documented (Berkeley 2004, Goody 2006).

Civic debate, whether in the media or otherwise, can encourage but never take the place of really responsive government. And as even local government research agrees (Nicholson 2005), even this civic debate is not taking place, so to speak, on a level playing field. For any civic actions or debates to be effective at preventing actions that one side does not wish to occur, there cannot be huge and unbridgeable inequalities in power. Nor are all forms of civic participation equally palatable to all of those in the governments who advocate it. Denying the importance of power relations between different groups of people, and the people and the state in democracies, when urging young people to become ‘engaged’ may actually be dangerous for democracy and demoralising for young people. Westheimer and Kahne make this argument particularly poignantly in their article on the meaning of citizenship:

those visions of obedience and patriotism that are often and increasingly associated with this agenda can be at odds with democratic goals. And even the widely accepted goals fostering
honesty, good neighborliness, and so on, are not inherently about democracy. Indeed, government leaders in a totalitarian regime would be as delighted as leaders in a democracy if their young citizens learned the lessons put forward by many of the proponents of personally responsible citizenship: don’t do drugs; show up to school; show up to work; give blood; help others during a flood; recycle; pick up litter; clean up a park; treat old people with respect. These are desirable traits for people living in a community. But they are not about democratic citizenship. To the extent that emphases on these character traits detract from other important democratic priorities, they may actually hinder rather than make possible democratic participation and change. For example, a focus on loyalty or obedience (common components of character education as well) works against the kind of critical reflection and action many assume are essential in a democratic society. (2006, pp. 6–7)

It is hard to miss the links between the ‘personally responsible citizenship’ described here and the Blairite communitarianism described by Ruth Lister. Westheimer and Kahn’s warnings about where the logic of such depoliticised dutiful citizenship might lead are stark. Yet stronger forms of citizen action – such as spontaneous general strikes that are not manipulated by corrupt union officials; the occupation of government or educational spaces; mass walk-outs and sit-ins; civil disobedience such as extended mass non-payment of taxes; or, as in France, in response to poverty, unemployment and racist policy, the burning of cars and the smashing of property such as shops – are vilified, often refused the label of ‘civic’ even by liberals, and treated with huge and disproportionately authoritarian responses by so-called democratic states.

Civic engagement – at any cost?

In much of the literature about youth and politics, civic action and citizenship education, there is an assumption that civic action, whether technological or otherwise, is better than no action and that ‘civic’ engagement is better than no engagement. But, however honourable and democratic the intentions of those suggesting this, is this categorically the case? Should we call for civic action and engagement on the part of young people as a certain good?

First of all, there are semantic and moral definitions and assumptions yoked to the notion that civic action is a certain good. Action is better than passivity – better for the young person or citizen, better for the demos or public, and hence better for the nation and the world. Second, there are assumptions being made about the inherently benevolent nature of civic engagement and action in terms of its link to democracy: civic action appears, even in sophisticated writing on this topic (Montgomery et al. 2004, Dahlgren 2007), to be linked to the notion of democracy so that the two are almost interchangeable. Dahlgren et al. (2007) write:

If we juxtapose ‘civic’ with ‘political’, we propose the following distinction, based on a loosely republican orientation: ‘civic’ resonates with civil society, in the sense of the social terrain that is public, shared, and outside the state and the corporate world. Further, it embodies a sense of the ‘public good’: a fundamental element of citizenship is thus a sense of service, of altruistic contribution (cf. the rhetoric of graduation speeches, admonishing contributions to the general welfare). The ‘political’, however, is more specific: it points to the conflicts of interest that arise on the civic terrain, and the resultant antagonisms. The major raison d’être of democracy can be said to be that it offers ways to resolve such conflicts in a manner that is just, binding, and nonviolent (2007, p. 10).

Ergo, in this definition, actions in the public sphere that arise out of far-Right ideologies or to further extreme authoritarian or inegalitarian causes are not counted as civic. In fact, they are distinctly uncivic. Following this logic, Montgomery et al., whose seminal report
Engaging the Digital Generation has been influential in challenging ideas about young people’s lack of civic and political efficacy in the United States, write:

Our use of the term ‘civic’ refers to this public realm and the whole body or community of citizens. It focuses on the active participation by community members in the exercise of public authority, the rights and responsibilities of community members, and the ways they work with one another as well as the ways they relate to government . . . . Finally, our definition of civic activity encompasses the notion of the public good, which is expressed by the National Civic League in the following terms: ‘The end result of a community’s civic education activities should be to engender within the community’s residents a commitment to participating in the betterment of that community. [This] must also include an attachment to justice, a willingness to serve beyond self-interest, an openness to all those who share the rank of citizen and a perspective that reaches beyond the generation living to those unborn. Thus the notion of the public good implies a commitment to justice and to the rights of those who are marginalized. Activities that are designed to harm, diminish, or exclude others, or deprive them of their rights, are not civic activities, even when conducted in the public realm by groups of active citizens.’ (2004, pp. 17–18)

But in what way does this definition – which yokes together benevolent moral intentions, pro-democratic outcomes and collective intervention in the public sphere – help us to understand the ways in which, and the reasons for which a diverse spectrum of people become involved in politics and the civic sphere? Can everyone who gets involved be doing so because of a commitment to and with the same understanding of the ‘public good’, ‘justice’ and ‘citizenship’?

This discussion, too, seems to turn on a strong presumption about national systems that are named ‘democracies’: namely, the notion that all civic action and political mobilisation in a country that allows voting and calls itself a democracy is democratic. But this may not tally with everyone’s experience of life even in a supposedly highly developed democratic country such as the UK. Indeed, realising the amount of discontent with current manifestations of democratic government, whether just or unjust, numerous right-wing and sectarian organisations across the globe are capitalising on young people’s desire for an alternative. In the following section, based on data gathered for research into the political and civic frameworks inhabited by young Indian and British-Asian film and news media viewers both on- and off-line (Banaji 2006, 2008, Banaji and Al-Ghabban 2006), I examine an example of a widespread civic movement involving youth in India that takes as its fundamental premise a set of ideas that is deeply antithetical to democracy.

Acknowledging right-wing civic activism

The far-Right Hindu Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) organisation started in India in the 1930s and boasts a large number of high-ranking government officials; it has both covert and open links to India’s powerful far-Right Hindu nationalist political party, the BJP, which ruled India during the 1990s and is still in power across numerous states (Noorani 2001, Banerjee 2006). The RSS has a long and well-documented (Sarkar 1993, Agarwal 2001, Bhatt 2002) history of xenophobia against Christian and Muslim minorities in India and elsewhere, as well as a history of ‘civic’ campaigns against Pakistan and Bangladesh, and against Pakistani and Bangladeshi migrants in India. It boasts hundreds of cadre groups of young men and some young women across the country and several larger bodies linked to the World Hindu Organisation, which is a large, proto-fascist, primarily upper-caste Hindu organisation with membership across the globe (Kapur 1998, Roy 2002). Ideologues of both these organisations write and talk about their admiration
for Hitler and Mussolini, the perspicacity of these leaders in realising that part of the population constituted an ‘enemy within’, and the example set to all Hindus by the ideologue and assassin Nathuram Godse, who shot Mahatma Gandhi. Reading any of this, it would be difficult to think of reasons for calling this organisation and its affiliates civic.

On the ground, however, things are more complicated. The RSS run the equivalent of camps or training clubs for young ‘volunteers’. They practise martial arts and listen to speeches and sermons about pure Indian blood; mind, body and spirit; and social work. They undertake local activities to encourage literacy for rural children and the rebuilding of derelict areas to serve the ‘community’ – obviously a community delimited by religion and caste, but nevertheless covering a huge area and number of people. Not all of those who enter the RSS do so for ‘uncivic’ motives (Sarkar and Basu 1993, Banerjee 2003). Many insist that they do so to ‘help their community’ (defined as Indians or Hindus), and to help their motherland/nation – India. They have strict training programmes of physical fitness and exercise, and a strong regime of obedience and discipline. These youth do not get into trouble with their parents and are often highly motivated at school and in community work. Some of them are interested in Hindu mythology and others in furthering the social interests of those who belong to their religion. To them, these are not overtly political motivations. In every piece of literature about itself and in discussion with members, the RSS describes itself as a civic and cultural and not a political organisation. Again, while not all dutiful citizens are necessarily laying themselves open to the potential for involvement in antidemocratic political movements, similarities with Westheimer and Kahne’s responsible and dutiful citizen become apparent in the RSS’ own categorisations of the attitudes and values of their membership.

Supported by religious nationalist and communitarian rhetoric on blogs and websites made by young sympathisers (Corbridge 1999, Bahri 2000), these organisations have collected hundreds of thousands of dollars each year from primarily young, non-resident Indians to support India’s aggressive anti-Pakistan stance and its nuclear programme. Despite court orders and legal challenges, in the course of the late 1990s and the following decade, thousands of young volunteers from the RSS have physically taken part in demolishing not just large and famous mosques all over India, such as the Babri Masjid at Ayodhya, but also hundreds of small Muslim and Christian shrines and churches and thousands of Muslim dwellings and shops; they have lobbied for and achieved the rewriting of history textbooks to demonise pre-twentieth century Islamic rulers of India as well as to exclude and excise Muslims and Christians from the Indian Freedom Struggle; their plan to put astrology on the national curriculum in India at university level was narrowly averted only by a change of government.

At a more militant and sinister level, they have participated in documented vicious anti-Muslim pogroms – either inciting or participating in the rape and murder of Muslim men, women and children and Hindu women married to Muslims, as well as mutilating, torturing and murdering Muslim men or those who sheltered Muslims in Gujarat as recently as 2002 (Anand and Setalwad 2002). RSS women cadre are known for supporting male cadre in raping and murdering Muslim women and children and for lying to protect them from prosecution (Banerjee 2002). In testimonies gathered by researchers and Human Rights organisations, both male and female cadre, who are generally young, see themselves as soldiers or fighters for the purity of their religion and nation. For students of history, there are clear parallels with the Hitler Youth.

The producer of one youth civic website in London stated that for him civic or political actions were simply ‘people trying to change the world to make it more like a place they wanted to live in’. In tune with this view, Christian fundamentalist youth in the United
States, young skinheads in the UK, and the far more diverse and powerful RSS youth in India believe in a highly stratified, racially or religiously purified world and take action to bring about this society. Refusing to see some of the actions taken by RSS cadre as civic because one is repulsed by their chauvinism and authoritarian philosophy, as well as by other actions taken in support of this ideology, makes it more difficult to understand why they have hundreds of thousands of young supporters or to explain their appeal in a specific place at a given historical moment. An inability to answer questions about the appeal of some organisations that involve youth in politics of whatever hue weakens rather than strengthens any case being made for democratic and civic action on the part of youth.

I suggest, then, that it is plausible to view civic engagement as never being just about idealistic or altruistic association with voluntary associations and activities for their own sake. There are all kinds of other emotional and ideological appeals that constantly surround civic action, and these appeals are neither inherently benevolent nor inherently to be condemned for diluting a field of ‘pure’ civic endeavour. Ziad Munson’s thoughtful study of pro-life movements and the young people who join them on college campuses in the United States (2007) outlines just a few of the ways in which life-cycle transitions, social networks, the actual presence of right-wing groups in the midst of student bodies, and a variety of cross-cutting emotional investments are all parts of the process by which youth are mobilised into pro-life activities without prior ideological commitments to an antiabortion stance. Additionally, Munson’s study questions the traditional linkage both within and outside academia of college campuses with the notion of liberal social activism. Although we may stipulate as many normative democratic definitions as we wish, just as with political beliefs and actions, real, as opposed to theoretical, civic action bears little necessary connection with democratic or liberal values.

**Conclusion: learning from history and theory**

The urge towards and the motivation for civic action can be traced in the contours of young people’s life experiences, the ideologies they encounter and abide by, their social contexts and neighbourhoods, and their political encounters, as well as their emotional commitments and loyalties, be these to race or religion, football, music, nation or local neighbourhood. Young people are not monolithic, and they are certainly not utterly different from older adults; they are a category cross-cut by ethnicity, gender, class, race and religion, as well as by disability and sexuality. They have as many or as few, and as varied or as circumscribed, opinions about their lives and their cultural circumstances as older adults. Kirshner et al. remind us that ‘terms such as “cynical,” or “alienated” that are used to categorise broad demographic groups misrepresent the complexity of youth’s attitudes towards their communities. Young people are often cynical and hopeful, or both critical and engaged’ (2003, p. 2). This point, as Sanchez-Jankowski (2002) suggests, is surprisingly often ignored or sidestepped in calls for young people to become more civically and politically active. Studies of underprivileged ethnic minority youth’s civic and political engagements in the United States (Sanchez-Jankowski 2002, Kirshner et al. 2003) and in the UK (Al-Ghabban 2007, Noor 2007) confirm that for some citizens in these democratic countries, civic engagement is predicated on a complex and angry critique of the way in which their supposed representatives in the Senate or Parliament actually regard people like them. Additionally, these critiques can have different outcomes for different individuals and different groups, leading some to find solutions and take action on commonly perceived problems, and leading others to do little or to participate in socially destructive actions.
Overwhelmingly in the global literature aimed at teaching young people and children civic values, there is an emphasis on conformity rather than on critique, confrontation or challenge; in the UK, there is also an emphasis on speaking and writing in particular ways that abide by the rules and norms set by a ruling elite who show little willingness to alter policies just because citizens do not agree with them. While there is certainly a need to avoid crass populism in government, what, if anything, is the point of participation that is never going to achieve anything? At some level, civic participation and engagement begin to look like instrumental justifications for citizenship of a particular country – somewhat like a licence fee – rather than signs of citizens’ political agency, maturity or power. And the requirement to participate, when viewed in this light, again begins to look particularly unappealing from the point of view of young people.

I end by asking a series of questions that those of us interested in the connections between young people, citizenship and civic action might usefully consider. First, would we want to endorse politics per se, any politics, however right-wing or authoritarian or violent, as being better than no politics or apathy, mistrust, scepticism or cynicism? Indeed, is reactionary civic involvement better than no involvement? Clearly, some of the examples provided and articles cited would suggest that the answer to both these questions is no.

Second, is democracy enhanced by defining civic action as de facto benign, altruistic and democratic? If there is never just a single ‘public’ in any nation state for whom one can define a notion of ‘the public good’ and on whose behalf all civic actions are urged and taken, again, there might be more danger in refusing to acknowledge that right-wing/authoritarian activism is civic than there is in accepting the term ‘civic’ as being composed of a spectrum from authoritarian and reactionary to libertarian and democratic. The latter strategy is understandably more time-consuming at the outset, as one cannot invoke a notion of democratic participation and action merely by championing civic engagement. However, I believe that in the long run it will be beneficial both to young people, in that it will be evident that certain kinds of collective action and engagement are worse than mere introversion or individualism, and to those trying to foster democratic engagement, as the affective and cognitive pulls of authoritarian and sectarian civic action are better understood and countered.

Thus, finally, and in a way echoing Lance Bennett’s question (2008, p. 20) about how ‘to nurture the creative and expressive actions of a generation in change, while continuing to keep some positive engagement with government’, it is worth asking how, if at all, is it possible to prevent the discovery that some politicians and governments are corrupt and/or unresponsive to citizens’ civic and political opinions and action from making young people choose apathetic acceptance or even right-wing civic activism over democratic civic action. Democracy in most countries does not live up to its ideal form but needs to be held accountable by a range of people within a country before its claims can be judged, and I, like many of the other authors quoted in this article, have no desire to see young people give up on this task before they have begun.

Notes
1. Civicweb (Young People, the Internet and Civic Participation), www.civicweb.eu (2006–9) is a project funded by the European Union and currently under way in seven European countries including the UK. Based on the European Union Framework 6 call on Citizens and Governance in a Knowledge-Based Society, it undertakes a critical assessment of the potential of the internet for re-engaging youth who are predominantly defined as apathetic. In the process, while
interrogating claims about the internet’s democratic potential, we also interrogate claims made about the extent and nature of young people’s disaffection.

2. It is not my intention to draw any parallels between the politics of the anticapitalist and neo-Nazi youth sites, but simply to note that they position themselves in certain ways in relation to government-orientated youth civic groups.


References


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