Youth Participation

in contemporary

European Social Movements

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Introduction

Policy makers and academics have long observed -and despaired of -the perceived lack of interest of youth in political participation. While it is true that youth interest in and participation in formal political institutions and processes such as voting have declined over the past decades, along with trust in democratic institutions and leaders, it is only when applying a very narrow definition of political participation[1] that one could conclude that youth have a low participation or interest in politics. If we broaden our definition beyond participation in elections and formal political institutions to include participation in civic and voluntary associations and in protest and social movements, the picture changes considerably. While it is true that youth are less inclined to vote in elections, the cases of the Colour Revolutions and the elections after the 11-M Madrid bombings (Flesher Fominaya 2011) show that at key moments youth will vote, and will work hard to mobilize the non-voting electorate. In this article I will focus on youth participation in social movements in contemporary Europe, highlighting some general characteristics over the past decades, as well as examples of key movements in which youth participation has been notable. First, however, a definition of social movements is in order.

Defining social movements

Definitions of social movements in the academic literature tend to be centered around some or all of the following characteristics:

- collective or joint action;
- some extra-institutional or non-institutional collective action;
- change oriented goals or claims;
- a target towards which these claims are directed (States, the public, corporations, specific political groups, a cultural practice, etc.);
- some degree of organization;
- some degree of temporal continuity;
- Some degree of shared solidarity or collective identity (Flesher Fominaya, forthcoming).

Youth participation in social movements

In the case of most progressive social movements in Europe in the past decades, youth have not only been key participants but have often been at the vanguard of these movements. To say this is to recognize that European youth have therefore been at the forefront of some of the most important political and social transformations in Europe's recent past, given the centrality of social movements to these changes (Cox and Flesher Fominaya, forthcoming). During the many periods of crisis and also in between, youth have been actively mobilizing for change.

In addition to the university and student movements, high youth participation has been notable in the counter cultural and revolutionary movements of the 1960 and 70s, including those for free speech and the anti-authoritarian movements preceding, during and following "May 68"; the peace, anti-war and environmental movements, and more recently the global justice movements and the recent wave of anti-austerity and pro-democracy movements in Europe. Of course youth not only mobilize in progressive or transformative movements, they are also very active in regressive movements, such as neo-Nazi or fascist movements, as well

as in conservative and fundamentalist faith-based movements. This high participation belies sweeping characterizations of youth as apolitical or cynical.

There are some general characteristics about youth which have been offered as reasons for their keen and active participation in social movements. The first reasons are ideological or motivational: this is the idea that youth, far from being passive, cynical and uninterested, are in fact passionately concerned about the state of the world and about the future. Youth have strong ideals and are often willing to rebel against the status quo. In a study on youth participation in "radical" or non-mainstream movements, researchers found that regardless of the ideology of those surveyed, whether extreme-right wing or anarchist or environmentalist, all the activists felt they were working to make the world a better place (Murer 2011). The second reason is a more instrumental –rational one: the fact is, there are a number of social problems that directly and disproportionately affect youth in Europe, such as unemployment or precarious employment and lack of access to affordable housing and bank credit. The current global financial crisis has only exacerbated these long term problems. If Inglehart's (1997) post-materialist values theory may have helped explain the expressive and identitarian elements of the so-called new social movements of the 70s , 80s, and early 90s, these same characteristics in social movements today are clearly linked to materialist concerns about economic prospects, inequalities and justice, both nationally and globally. Structural reasons that can be suggested to explain high youth participation in social movements include the fact that youth quite simply tend to have fewer responsibilities and more free time, which they can devote to activism if they choose. They often have less to lose as a result of their activism, and are therefore often willing to take greater risks in political participation and protest in repressive contexts. In the case they have not started career or families, which is more likely for youth, they can assume the risks involved in participating in protest and opposition movements (Kuzio 2006). Psycho-social factors related to their age are also put forward: youth may be searching for a sense of belonging or a status group, or for means of self-expression and social movement participation provides one means of doing this[2].

If these factors influence individual youth participation, it is also true that young people are often connected in social networks with other young people that can provide an important basis for mobilization. The university is one such key arena (Crossley 2008). Universities bring young people together in a shared environment where they are exposed to new critical ideas, where they learn skills that enable them to analyze and diagnose social, political, and economic problems, and where informal and formal student organizations provide a framework that enables them to mobilize around shared concerns and identities. Recent youth movements are also characterized by a high use of information and communication technologies, and social media, which younger people not only use more but with more skill than older generations[3]. Youth practices such as "chain SMS" messaging are also put to use in political protest contexts, such as the 13-M protests following the Madrid bombings in Spain (Francescutti et. al 2005, Flesher Fominaya 2011). Young people use their creativity, skill and knowledge to put these tools in the service of their political activism.

Disaffection with established political institutions coupled with a high level of concern about social and political issues and availability make it more likely that youth will seek alternatives to "politics as usual". For youth in post-communist European societies, established party organizations were associated with authoritarian regimes, not democratic ones; for youth in the west they are often seen as bastions of elite power, cut off from ordinary citizen or youth concerns, and concerned with maintaining, not transforming, the status quo.

Autonomous vs. traditional social movements

While a rejection of institutional politics is a generational trend in the broad population, within the European social movement landscape it also represents an important ideological tension that has been critical since the 1960s: that between autonomous movements and more institutional left social movement actors. The high participation of youth in autonomous movements helps show that a lack of belief or interest in established institutional political institutions and processes does not equate with a lack of interest in political participation or with democracy. Autonomous social movement actors have played a key role in feminist, squatter, peace, environmental, and student movements, and youth participation has been very high in all of these across Europe.

Autonomous movements tend to reject representative democracy and majority rule and instead defend a participatory model, based on direct democracy and self-governance, with horizontal (non- hierarchical) structures, decision making through consensus (if possible and necessary) or common minimum agreements, in the forum of an assembly (usually open), and rarely with permanent delegations of responsibility (Flesher Fominaya 2007)[4]. The lack of formal organizational and institutional infrastructures means that developed social network structures, facilitated by information and communication technologies and social media, as well as collective identity processes are crucial in maintaining internal coherence in these movements and enable rapid mobilization in new contexts (rather than the mobilization of formally organized membership structures). In the case of the Spanish *Indignados*, for example, autonomous positioning means that actors refused participation of institutional left actors (as representatives of organizations, not as individuals) in movement assemblies (Calvo forthcoming, Romanos forthcoming). One of the key principles of "acampadasol" -the network of public debate assemblies of the 15-M movement -was "unrepresentativeness", that is, that individuals only represent themselves in the assemblies, rather than groups or formal organization.

It is easy to see the appeal of autonomous groups for young activists, who want to experiment and develop practices that represent a rejection of "old" or "traditional" ways of doing things as well as prefiguring the world they would like to see: one that is more egalitarian, based more on direct and full participation and more connected to "ordinary" people and their problems.

Indeed the ideological legacies of autonomous movements since the sixties continue to deeply influence social movements today, and these include some core ideas, all of which were central to feminist theories and women's movements. The first, encapsulated in the slogan "the personal is political", is the idea that in order to transform politics it is necessary to transform a whole way of life, and that one cannot separate politics from everyday problems. The second is that society will never reach its full potential, without the full incorporation, participation, and equality of all of its citizens. The third idea is that social movements need autonomy and free space to develop their critiques, strategies and alternatives, free from the control of hegemonic power structures. The fourth idea is that we cannot wait for a future revolution to make things better, it is necessary to start building the future today.

Key areas of mobilisation (I): Democracy

The concern with equality and participation in autonomous movements-in which young people have been very active and highly represented- is deeply connected to a broader concern with democracy. Indeed the contrast between the lack of trust in democratic institutions documented among European youth and the importance of the value of democracy itself in contemporary European progressive social movements is striking. These movements encompass a range of historical periods and geographic locations, from the Slovenian "rock the vote" to the Serbian Otpor, Ukrainian PORA and Georgian Kmara!, "colour revolutions" all of which were focused on the overthrow of authoritarian regimes and the introduction of free and fair elections and respect for democratic constitutions (Kuzio 2006, Ó Beacháin and Polese 2010); to the global justice movement, which had at its core the demand for real democracy and democratic oversight and control of corporate and economic elites as a means of righting the wrongs of the global capitalist system (Della Porta 2007, Flesher Fominaya forthcoming); to the recent wave of protests encompassed in the the recent wave of anti-austerity and pro-democracy movements in Europe, which include the Icelandic "pots and pans" revolution, the Spanish Indignados/15-M movements, the Portuguese Geraçao a Rasca movement, the Greek Syntagma movements and the various Occupy protests in the UK and Ireland (Flesher Fominaya and Cox, forthcoming)[5]. In all of these movements the demand for a *real* democracy now (the slogan of the "Indignados" which might well have been that of the earlier "colour" revolutions) , a democracy that includes full citizen participation and democratic accountability of elected officials, has been central.

Key areas of mobilisation (II): youth's social problems

Other key areas of youth mobilization have centered on the social problems youth are facing. Indeed young activists have been responsible for putting the notion and concern with "precariousness" on the European political and social agenda, and have included initiatives such as the mass EuroMayday protest marches (Mattoni 2012). Precariousness highlights the uncertainty of the future for today's youth. This uncertainty centres around labour precariousness, high youth unemployment rates, lack of affordable housing, lack of mortgage availability and bank credit, and severe cuts to pensions and welfare programs, added to which are the privatization of the university, the devaluation of degrees and the scarcity of employment opportunities. Precariousness as a mobilizing concept is linked to an entire social condition for youth, who face uncertain and unstable futures, which creates a feeling of anxiety that permeates their lives but can also unite them with a shared collective identity.

The mobilization around precariousness has influenced the framing of the recent anti-austerity movements, and reflects the anger of a young "desperate generation" (or *Geraçao a Rasca* as the Portuguese youth movement inspired by the Arab Spring called itself[6]) who feel that they are paying the price for the greed and irresponsibility of the political and economic elites who have engaged in fraud, gross mismanagement and irresponsible behaviour. They see these elites as having contributed to a global financial crisis whose "solutions" involve billion euro bank bailouts that young people will be paying off for years to come and austerity measures that seriously compromise not only their futures but their present.

The issue of precariousness and the critique of the global neo-liberal capitalist regime has also manifested itself in the many university based protests over the past decades. Youth mobilizations against university reforms predate the current financial crisis (e.g. Denmark 2005; Italy 2005; Spain 2005-2006;France 2006; Greece 2006) but in these protests and in more recent university mobilizations such as the mass demonstrations in the UK in 2010, where university fees were tripled[7], protesters make clear links between the global financial

system and the corporatization of the university. Student protesters make connections between the transformation of the university as a strategic sector in the global knowledge market, where what is taught is geared mainly towards knowledge that will generate profit, and their own precarious present and future as workers in a deregulated and hyper flexible labour market.

Conclusion: strong extra-institutional youth participation

Youth political participation in autonomous movements, whatever their primary issue or concern or ideological orientation, is often hard to measure or "see" until the protests become visible in mass demonstrations. However, scholars of social movements, particularly those with strong connections to the movements or who use ethnographic or in depth qualitative methods, know that rarely if ever are these mobilizations spontaneous eruptions of political sentiment, but rather represent an ongoing engagement with politics in civic associations and social movement networks[8]. When we shift our gaze from institutional to extra-institutional forms of political participation, the contemporary European social movement landscape is a vivid testament to the high degree of political participation of many European youth.

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1. For an overview of definitions of political participation in the context of a discussion of youth, see Forbrig (2005).
2. In his study on youth participation in "radical" groups, Murer (2011) found that a search for a sense of belonging was a greater motivator than a pre-existing ideological commitment, although such a commitment did develop once the respondents were incorporated into the groups.
3. For more on youth use of ICTs in Europe, see the EUKids online project http://www2.lse.ac.uk/media@lse/research/EUKidsOnline/Home.aspx, which contains a data base of numerous studies conducted in Europe.

4. For more on European autonomous movements, see Katsiaficas 2006, Flesher Fominaya 2010.
5. For a discussion of the centrality of democracy to both the Global Justice Movement and the recent European Indignados style movements see Della Porta 2012.
6. These protesters took to the streets on 12 March 2011 in the biggest public demonstration since the 1974 revolution.
7. Scottish devolution means the Scottish parliament controls fee decisions, and students in Scotland do not have to pay university fees.
8. Melucci (1989) referred to these networks as submerged laboratories of creative political experimentation, highlighting the difference between latent and visible poles of movement activity.