

Explaining Young People's Non-participation: Towards a Fuller Understanding of the Political

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INTRODUCTION

A Crisis of Youth Participation?

There has been widespread concern about young people's political participation in the United Kingdom. For example, there was consternation over the turn-out rate among 18-24 year-olds in the 2001 General Election, which was estimated at only 39%, compared to an overall (rather low) turnout of 59.4%.¹ This turnout was down 27% from the 1997 election and reflects a continuing downward trend in electoral participation among British youth. The UK Government has been so concerned about declining political and civic engagement among young people that in 1997 it commissioned the Crick Report, *Education for Citizenship and the Teaching of Democracy in Schools*. The report recommended that citizenship education should be compulsory for secondary school pupils, in order to tackle problems of declining political and civic participation among young people.² Since September 2002, these classes form 5% of the national curriculum in England and Wales and are currently being extended to post-16 education provision also.

There is furthermore a dominant media narrative that portrays young people in Britain as politically inactive, with commentators talking of the growth of an 'apathy generation' or 'Thatcher's airheads'.³ It is routinely observed in Britain that more young people voted in the reality TV show *Big Brother* than in they did in the last General Election. The man behind *Big Brother*, Peter Bazalgette, recently joined forces with the Conservatives (the Party with the most ageing membership) to devise new ways of engaging young people in electoral politics. The latest initiative in this vein is a proposed *Big Brother*-style show to choose a candidate to stand in the next General Election as a means of re-engaging young people in political processes.

The notion that British young people's interest and participation in formal politics is declining is supported by survey research. Pirie and Worcester, for instance, claim that the 'Millennial Generation' of young people who reached the age of 21 just before or just after the turn of the millennium are less involved in politics than the equivalent age group were 30 years ago, less likely to vote in national or local elections than older people now or young people 30 years ago and have little knowledge of politics at local, national or European levels. They conclude that this generation is an 'apolitical

¹ Electoral Commission, *Election 2001: The Official Results*, (2001) Portico's, London.

² Bernard Crick: *Education for Citizenship and the Teaching of Democracy in Schools: Final Report of the Advisory Group on Citizenship*, (1998) Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, London.

³ Donald Hiscock, 'The Apathy Generation' in *The Guardian*, May 9 2001; P. Toynbee, 'Mrs. Thatcher's Airhead Revenge' in *The Independent* April 28, 1997.

generation'.⁴ Similarly, Park's survey data of social attitudes among British youth indicates that teenagers and young adults are less likely to be involved in conventional politics, be knowledgeable about politics, have an attachment to any political party, or view voting as a civic responsibility.⁵

Such concerns are hardly confined to the UK. There are numerous studies reporting declining levels of political engagement and participation among young people worldwide.⁶ Data from the Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, for instance, suggest that in Western Europe, the USA, Russia and Latin America, there is a consistent pattern of young people being less involved in the electoral process than older cohorts (with South Africa constituting a notable exception to this trend).⁷ A report commissioned by the European Union notes that: 'declining political engagement and traditional societal participation among youth is perceived as a threat to the future of the representative democracy' and is a particular source of concern in several EU states, such as the United Kingdom, Sweden, Finland, Norway, Austria and Luxembourg.⁸

Questioning the Youth Apathy Myth

Recent in-depth youth research studies of young Britons, however, have questioned this view of them as politically apathetic or inactive.⁹ A number of recent studies, drawing on qualitative methodologies, rather than quantitative survey techniques, have attempted to take a broader view of the ways in which young people engage in political and civic life. They suggest that young people are indeed turning away from formal, mainstream politics, but this does not mean that they are necessarily politically apathetic – rather young people are reasonably interested in politics and political issues, but cynical about politicians and formal mechanisms for political participation. Eden and Roker argue, furthermore, that debates about young people and politics habitually fail to consider areas where young people *are* active. Their research suggests that certain types of youth civic participation are in fact increasing, particularly peer education, youth councils, youth run and managed projects and peer support groups.¹⁰

More recently, a re-evaluation of the myth of youth political apathy was prompted by the anti-war demonstrations of last year, when we saw the emptying of classrooms and

⁴ M. Pirie & R.M. Worcester, *The Millennial Generation*, (1998) MORI/ Adam Smith Institute, London; pp. 10-11.

⁵ Alison Park, *Young People's Social Attitudes 1998: Full Report of Research Activities and Results*, (1998) ESRC, Keele.

⁶ See for example, Pippa Norris, 'Young People and Political Activism: From the Politics of Loyalties to the Politics of Choice?' report for the Council of Europe Symposium, 27-28 November, 2003, and see the special edition of *Journal of Youth Studies* on Youth and politics, 2003, vol. 6, no. 3.

⁷ IDEA, *Youth Voter Participation: Involving Today's Young in Tomorrow's Democracy*, (1999) IDEA, Stockholm.

⁸ Istituto di Ricerca, *Study on the State of Young People and Youth Policy in Europe*, (2001) Istituto di Ricerca, Milan.

⁹ K. Eden & D. Roker, "You've Gotta Do Something...": A Longitudinal Study of Young People's Involvement in Social Action', (2000) *Youth Research 2000* conference paper, University of Keele; M. Henn, M. Weinstein & D. Wring, 'A Generation Apart? Youth and Political Participation in Britain' in *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, (2002) vol. 4, no. 2.; C. White, S. Bruce & R. Ritchie, *Young People's Politics: Political interest and engagement amongst 14-24 year olds*, (2000) Joseph Rowntree Foundation, York.

¹⁰ Eden & Roker, op.cit.

the pouring of young people (many below voting age) out onto the streets to engage in political protest. Since then, there has been a questioning among media and political commentators of the consensus that young people are politically apathetic.¹¹ Whilst there is perhaps rather less certainty now that young people are an ‘apolitical generation’, the gap between falling participation in formal politics on the one hand, and reported reasonably high levels of political interest on the other, requires further investigation.

It is not clear in the literature *why* young people’s participation is different to that of other age groups. Most explanations for why young people appear to be ‘tuning out’ of formal mainstream politics – such as cynicism regarding the integrity of politicians, perceived lack of choices between parties, dissatisfaction with local government procedures – might equally apply to adults. Yet, young people not only participate less than adults, but their levels of participation are declining at a faster rate. The 19th British Social Attitudes Survey of 2002, furthermore, suggested that young people are actually no more distrustful of government than other age groups.¹² Within existing studies, particularly survey research, age is often treated merely as a variable¹³ and consequently, there are insufficient youth-specific explanations for declining political engagement among young people. There is, then, a lack of clarity about whether, or how, young people approach politics differently: we do not have satisfactory data to explain why young people are increasingly less likely than adults to vote, write to politicians, join a political party and so on.

In particular, the tendency to treat age as a variable does not allow for the exploration of generation and life-cycle effects. Generation effects arise from the fact that successive generations face new challenges and experiences that make them different to previous generations. Thus the political issues and arenas familiar to older generations as foci and sites of political activity may well have little relevance to young people.¹⁴ Life-cycle effects arise from the similar constraints, choices and expectations that young people experience, which differ from other age groups and which are likely to change when they themselves are no longer young. Such differences may arise from differential legal and policy status with regard to the age of responsibility, assumption of voting rights, welfare entitlements and so on. They may also arise as a consequence of processes of transition, such as from education to employment, from dependency to partial dependency to independence.¹⁵

The lack of youth-specific explanations is further compounded by a tendency within much of the research on political participation to operate with a rather narrow conception of ‘the political’, which is effectively imposed upon the respondents. Little attempt is made to explore how people themselves define politics. Furthermore, non-

¹¹ Libby Brooks, ‘Kid Power’ in *The Guardian*, 26th April 2003; Lyndsey Turner, ‘From the classroom to the ballot box’ in *The Guardian*, 13th January, 2004.

¹² Alison Park, John Curtice, Katarina Thomson, Lindsey Jarvis and Catherine Bromley (eds.), *British Social Attitudes, the 19th Report*, (2002), Sage, London.

¹³ See G. Parry, G. Moyser and N. Day, *Political Participation and Democracy in Britain*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992.

¹⁴ R. Jowell & A. Park, *Young People, Politics and Citizenship: A Disengaged Generation?*, (1998) Citizenship Foundation, London.

¹⁵ R. Coles, *Youth and Social Policy: Youth Citizenship and Youth Careers*, (1995) UCL Press, London.

participation in the activities designated by researchers is routinely analysed as evidence of political apathy. Yet non-participation is a much more complex phenomenon.

Understanding youth non-participation: a broader conception of the political

In this respect, our research argued that the analysis of political participation needed to be based on a broader conception of the political.¹⁶ By listening to how young people themselves conceived of politics, furthermore, we argued that we could begin to theorise about the distinctive issues and experiences that characterise young people's politics. We therefore set out to explore young people's own conceptions of the political, through the use of open-ended qualitative interviews with a range of young people from different educational backgrounds, ages (across the 16-25 range) and ethnic groups.¹⁷

Using this approach, our study found that young people were very far from being politically apathetic. In fact they were highly articulate about the political issues that affected them, as well as about the disconnection between these and mainstream politics. Their responses demonstrated the ways in which politics for them was very much a lived experience – rather than a set of distinct arenas that they chose to enter or avoid.¹⁸

Drawing on these research findings, I wish to suggest in this paper two ways in which we might understand the particular factors shaping young people's political engagement, in order to explain why their patterns of participation are different to those of older cohorts.

The first relates to what we might see as the development of new modes of political participation, which Henrik Bang identifies as a consequence of new forms of 'culture governance' that have served to expand and diffuse what we might term the political. Within these patterns of 'culture governance', we can see the emergence of 'expert citizens' and 'everyday makers' who politically participate in non-traditional ways and generally outside of formal arenas of politics. We can see many of the features of Bang's everyday makers among our young respondents and I wish to suggest that we might see these as forming a generation effect.¹⁹

Secondly, there is a need to pay attention to life-cycle effects that shape young people's political engagement. Here I wish to draw attention to young people's distinctive interests and experiences of political exclusion, which create obstacles and disincentives to participation.

¹⁶ ESRC Project, L215252015, *Explaining Non-participation: Towards a Fuller Understanding of the Political*, with Dave Marsh and Su Jones.

¹⁷ For a fuller discussion of our methodological approach, see T. O'Toole, et.al., 'Tuning out or left out? Participation and non-participation among young people' in *Contemporary Politics*, (2003) vol. 9, no. 1.

¹⁸ For further discussion of the conceptual arguments and findings of this research, see T. O'Toole, D. Marsh & S. Jones, 'Political Literacy Cuts Both Ways' in *Political Quarterly*, (2003) vol. 74, no. 3; and T. O'Toole, 'Engaging with Young People's Conceptions of the Political' in *Children's Geographies*, (2003) vol. 1, no. 1.

¹⁹ Henrik Bang, 'A New Ruler Meeting a New Citizen: Culture Governance and Everyday Making' in *Governance as Social and Political Communication*, (2003) ed. Henrik Bang, Manchester University Press, Manchester.

UNDERSTANDING YOUNG PEOPLE'S POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

A distinct generation?

There are studies claiming that a generation shift in young people's political culture is taking place, which makes their views and expectations different to those of previous generations.²⁰ Inglehart, for instance, identifies a postmaterialist generation, for which increasing affluence, consumerism and individualism have led to a breakdown in the collectivist values of previous generations and thus a shift in their political orientations. As a consequence, we see greater participation in issue-led, rather than ideological, politics and a concern with issues such as the environment or animal rights, rather than industrial relations, and so on. Furlong and Cartmel also point to the increasing individualisation among young people in post-industrial society,²¹ whilst Putnam has famously argued that there has been a decline in social capital and associational membership²² and many link this to the decline of political participation in advanced democracies.

These studies tend to root these trends in social change and pay rather little attention to the role that changes in the political environment may have on political engagement. Recent attempts to relate these social changes to the changing role of the state and to explore how these affect political attitudes and behaviour have been made by Pirie and Worcester and Henrik Bang.

The Millennial Generation?

As stated above, Pirie and Worcester identify an apolitical 'Millennial Generation'²³ of young people who they argue are less likely to be political participants than older people now, or young people 30 years ago. They claim that today's young people are increasingly unwilling to participate in social or community activism and that '[c]itizenship, insofar as it involves participation in the community, is the big turn-off'.²⁴ They cite the increasing withdrawal of the state from people's lives as a reason for young people's declining civic and political participation. Consequently, they suggest, young people do not vote 'because they feel it does not meet their concerns or address their needs. They do not see its relevance, or think it will make any difference to them'.²⁵ Pirie and Worcester argue then that there are generation effects at work, which have serious repercussions for young people's propensity to participate in political or community activities.

Yet, the notion that the state is withdrawing from people's lives, particularly in the case of young people, may be somewhat overplayed, since the state still figures very substantially in the lives of young people – who, by virtue of their age, tend to have

²⁰ M. Pirie and R. Worcester, *The Big Turn-off: Attitudes of Young People to Government, Citizenship and Community*, (2000) Adam Smith Institute, London; H. Wilkinson & G. Mulgan, 'Freedom's Children and the Rise of Generational Politics' in *Life after Politics: New Thinking for the Twenty-first Century*, (1997) Fontana, London.

²¹ Andrew Furlong & Fred Cartmel, *Young People and Social Change: Individualisation and Risk in Late Modernity*, (1997) Open University Press, Buckingham.

²² Robert Putnam, 'Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital' in *Journal of Democracy*, (1995) vol. 6, no. 1.

²³ Pirie and Worcester, (1998), op.cit.

²⁴ Pirie and Worcester, (2000) op.cit., p. 24.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

very little economic autonomy and do not always enjoy full political, legal or social rights. In other words, young people may be rather less affected by the state's declining role in providing social or economic goods, as many experience compulsory vocational, education or training schemes (such as New Deal for example).

Pirie and Worcester's analysis is premised on the view that there has been a contraction in political participation that is a corollary of a contraction of the political sphere. What they do not explore is the possibility that changes in the political sphere may have resulted in new repertoires or modes of political participation. This possibility is addressed by Henrik Bang, who suggests, contrary to Pirie and Worcester, that the political sphere has *not* contracted, rather the boundaries between the political (public) sphere and society are dissolving. In fact, he suggests, the scope of the political in late modern society is expanding and is much more expressed in and through people's everyday lives – in his phrase the 'political is now personal'.²⁶ In this analysis, changes in the political sphere have altered the modes of political participation.

Changing patterns of governance and the emergence of 'everyday-makers'

Bang identifies the emergence of a new relationship between political authorities and lay people, 'in the shape of a highly politicised and culturally oriented new management and administration' which he terms culture governance; and a strongly individualised and consumption oriented new citizen', who he terms the 'everyday maker'. Culture governance is characterised by 'strategic communication oriented towards attaining influence and success by involving and partnering with individuals and groups in the political community'.²⁷ Everyday making is characterised by: 'tactical communication oriented towards the building of reflexive communities where individuals and groups can feel engaged and practise their freedoms in their mutual recognition of difference.'²⁸

This new relationship between political authorities and citizenry has been brought about by globalisation alongside increased localisation (or 'glocalisation' as he refers to it), and by the increasing complexity of governance. He suggests that 'high modern society has grown so complex, dynamic and differentiated that no expert system can any longer rule itself solely by exercising hierarchical and bureaucratic control over people.'²⁹ The result is a shift from government to governance, driven by the need to form partnerships between political authorities and the citizenry in order to deliver effective decision-making. This new culture of governance is characterised then by self and co-governance, an emphasis on user influence, citizenship participation, private-public partnerships, human development, team-building and so on.

Culture governance, according to Bang, is political but not in the 'old' sense, i.e. culture governance does not delimit the political to the role of the state, parties, parliaments and politicians, nor does it speak in the language of organised, interests, mass media, social movements and the people. Rather, it is political in directly addressing the individual: articulating global outlooks with local views in a language of difference and operative, rather than abstract, rights (such as the right to connect, learn, share and grow, etc).³⁰

²⁶ Henrik Bang, *Everyday Makers and Expert Citizens: Building Political not Social Capital*, (2004) Australian National University, mimeo.

²⁷ Henrik Bang, (2003), op.cit. p. 241.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 241.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 244.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 246.

The result of this is a breakdown in the conventional separation between the state and civil society. The boundary between the political community and the political system is dissolved, because lay people within the political community need to be harnessed into self-government practices in order to provide expert governance.

These changes alter the modes of political participation and Bang distinguishes between those who participate as expert citizens and those who act as ‘everyday makers’. Both expert citizens and everyday makers engage in the building and running of governance networks and reflexive political communities – often in voluntary and social organisations and groups. Neither, however, relate strongly to ideological politics, or to conventional types of participation such as inter-elite bargaining or outright opposition to the state. Rather they are likely to communicate and co-operate in horizontally organised networks and reflexive communities. Both expert citizens and everyday makers ‘are much more interested in enhancing their personal and common capacities for self-governance and co-governance, right where they are, than in submitting themselves to an abstract social norm or mode of state citizenship.’³¹

But where expert citizens fight to acquire influence through strategic communication and expert deliberation with political elites, everyday makers ‘want to decide what to do for themselves’ and are engaged in ‘a micropolitics of becoming’.³² Thus, he states

To be an [everyday maker] is to be more individualistic, more project oriented, more ‘on’ than ‘off’ and ‘hit and run’ in one’s engagement, more pleasure oriented and more fun-seeking, than is usually associated with being civilly engaged. Everyday makers ‘do not primarily gain their political identities from being citizens of the state or of an autonomous civil society, but from being ordinarily engaged in the construction of networks and locales for the political governance of the social.’³³

Stated briefly, everyday makers:

- disassociate themselves from expert citizens in insisting on being ordinary and being in politics for reasons other than to acquire success or influence;
- do not have the same full-time project identity as expert citizens because they loathe thinking of political participation as being for life;
- are not interested in democratic government nor are they in opposition to it either;
- do not want to engage in politics, because they think of politics as something one engages in at close range;
- consider the institutions and networks that they encounter as part of everyday life than as of properties of government;
- do not look upon themselves as moral beings with a strong sense of social solidarity.

What is interesting from our point of view is how Bang sees the everyday maker mode of participation as being strongly demonstrated among young people. As one of his respondents described:

I’ve seen how young people over the course of the last decade organise and involve themselves very differently. The fact of the matter is that young people are actually very engaged. The thing is that they are engaged in ways that the older generations consider unconventional. It’s

³¹ Henrik Bang, (2004) op.cit., p. 26.

³² Ibid., p. 14.

³³ Ibid., p. 26.

often a matter of getting involved in a concrete project, and then engaging oneself 100% in it for a short period and then they stop. They don't participate in the long term'.³⁴

Young People as Everyday Makers

There are a number of key features of Bang's everyday makers, which I wish to analyse now in relation to our own data on young people's conceptions of the political. Firstly, Bang suggests that everyday makers are distinctive in their orientations towards elite politics, in the sense that they do not relate to concepts of right and left and are critical of politicians and parties. Secondly, they politically participate in distinctive ways: preferring to get involved on the lowest level, in concrete issues and on a short-term basis. Finally, they are disengaged from the state – neither seeking influence within it, nor engaging in opposition to it.

In this section, I will examine how far our data supports the notion that young people can be seen as 'everyday makers'.

1) Everyday Makers' Attitudes towards Elite Politics

Our respondents were highly sceptical about the credibility and integrity of politicians and political parties. In common with Bang's everyday makers, they were hostile towards the pursuit of political power and influence. There was a common perception, unsurprisingly perhaps, that politicians were self-interested, untrustworthy and power-hungry.

I think young people particularly are very suspicious of MPs...I mean, we've grown up in the era of sleaze...This person's a crook, that person's a crook. And it doesn't even appear to be from one particular party, although they've made a big deal that it was about the Conservatives, it's just turned out that they're all involved...Credibility is a real problem for politicians.'

Female, University Student, 20, White, individual interview

the people that are attracted [to politics] aren't necessarily the people that are going to identify with ordinary people, because they are usually only going for the job because they're interested in power.'

Female, University Student, 21, White, individual interview

Politics to me is just the one with the biggest boot gets to kick ass...the one with the biggest sword on your side.

Male, New Dealer, 19, White, individual interview

There was a recurring theme across our respondents that politicians and parties did not represent the views of young people, either because they were seen as remote and unrepresentative or because they lacked any real commitment to addressing their interests or concerns. There was a dominant perception that politicians were disconnected from the lives of ordinary, and especially young, people, this was exacerbated for most by inadequate numbers of black, Asian, female or young politicians.

you get a youthful politician say in their early twenties, late twenties, yeah, she could help. But someone who's 40, 50, seeing themselves as having their own views, I mean, they don't like the kids nowadays, they just see them as just scallies [i.e. idle and dishonest] or something.

Male, Sixth-former, 18, White, individual interview

³⁴ Ibid., p. 23.

There's a lot of older politicians, and I know that they've got the benefit of experience, but it's difficult to see them speaking on our behalf... because they do seem to be from one strain...it often seems to be the way, I think, to young people that we're not truly represented.'

Female, University Student, 21, White, individual interview

One respondent suggested that problems of racism were exacerbated by the poor visibility of ethnic minorities at a national level and because politicians did not mix across ethnic groups. He suggested this was necessary for change to occur:

If the politicians started mixing with different races, they might understand about what people actually need, and maybe they could make a difference.

Male, FE College Student, 19, Asian, group interview

Several young women complained that there were too few women in politics, and perceived politics as dominated by men and a male-culture that was not welcoming or accessible to women. Many felt that politicians were not closely identified with the areas they sought to represent.

then you hear them speak and they don't even have the accent of the area they live in that they are supposed to be representing. That's stupid, how can you represent somewhere if you probably do a fly-by visit in your car and then toddle off back to your nice little mansion?

Female, New Dealer, 19, Black, group interview

The sense that politicians are not socially representative tended to have a negative impact on our respondents' views about their own abilities to participate meaningfully in politics or to have their opinions taken seriously.

There was also a strong tendency not to identify with parties as organisations articulating distinct ideologies, but as to see them as divisive and opposed to community interests:

if there was no Conservative, there was no Labour, there was no BNP, but a United Kingdom party, it was the United Kingdom party, then everything would be fine.

Male, FE College Student, 19, Asian, individual interview

The expectation that politicians ought to be representative tends to confirm Bang's view that everyday makers see politics as being about the recognition of difference – the failure of political institutions to do so is thus seen as deeply negative. The hostility among our respondents towards seeing politics as an expression of ideological differences also confirms what Bang describes as a preference for community organisation.

2) Everyday Makers' Experiences of and Attitudes towards Political Participation

Very few of our respondents could be characterised as conventional participants: we found no party members; few were members of single-issue groups; and none could be described as activists in the conventional sense. A high proportion of our respondents stated they were unlikely to vote either in local, national or European elections. Those who had actual experience of political participation tended, overwhelmingly, to have participated in local community actions or campaigns. For example, one had been involved in a local campaign for the introduction of speed-bumps after a young child had been killed on a dangerous stretch of road. Another had been involved in lobbying

the Council to clean up a children's playground, whilst another had engaged in a community action to demolish a building used by injecting heroin-users located on a children's playground. Our respondents' views of such actions were highly positive, and such views were in sharp distinction to the negative views from many of our respondents towards national or mainstream politics.

I would [politically participate] if it had some good for the community...I'd put my name on a petition, I'd go to a rally in the city centre or something. But that would be it. When it came down to mainstream politics, no. Because, in the community, when you campaign for something like a park, you would get parents who are Black, white, Asian, everything. Then there is no racism, it's all about the kids. And, it doesn't matter how racist you are, your kids come first, or they should, and it doesn't matter. We are all doing good for the greater good of the community and it doesn't matter at all. But anything that goes into large-scale, I don't want to be a part of. I wouldn't like to be a part of it... when you get into mainstream politics, you're fighting against people... There was no, we were all against one person, we were against the Council, we were forcing the Council to do the park up, and that would be it, and the Council there's no, we don't see the Council as being racist at all, because it's the Council... and the Council doesn't get racist – not like politics at all.

Male, FE College Student, 19, Asian, individual interview

During the course of an interview with a group of seven female sixth-formers, nearly all from the group indicated they would not vote in general elections even if they were old enough, yet all of them stated that they would have voted in a recent local referendum on a proposal to transfer housing stock from Birmingham City Council to Housing Association ownership, and all would have voted against the proposal. This group, at least, were highly politicised by the campaign to block the transfer, even though they were ineligible to vote. As one suggested:

at least you know you've got em, with Birmingham City Council, if you need a repair done you go to them, you complain to them, but when you've just got one landlord, then you're just stuck with that one person.

Female Sixth-former, 17, White, group interview

Similarly, respondents who had little interest in voting were considerably more interested in participating in initiatives to enhance activities and resources for young people at a local level. Thus, when discussing actions that they would be likely to get involved in, there was strong interest in local community involvement:

...probably about my community or something, you know, I don't want my community run down, even though I don't like the place, I don't want to see it trashed...I'd do something about drugs as well...like give a session in the community centre...

Male, New Dealer, 23, White, individual interview

Our respondents tended to express fairly high levels of political efficacy in relation to local participation that stood in sharp contrast to their lack of political efficacy at any other level:

Say, if you wanted to build like a youth centre or community centre and stuff like that, ...then maybe you'd have to go through your local council, just to like, even just to get the planning permission, or whatever, or maybe money, but that's your main way. But, if you wanted to make a difference and you thought like the council is not gonna bother, so I'll do something myself then, yeah.

Male, Sixth-former 18, White, individual interview

For many of our respondents then political engagement was expressed in terms of self-help, community involvement at the local level and everyday self-actualisation.

3) Attitudes towards the State

Bang's everyday makers are characterised by their focus on engagement in flat communities rather than by direct negotiation with or opposition to the state. Indeed, what is distinctive about them, he suggests, is their lack of engagement with the state. Here, our data parts company with Bang's everyday maker model. Our respondents' conceptions of the political tended to be intensely state-centred, with many believing that their lives were constantly determined by the state – at one extreme, one respondent felt as though he were treated as a laboratory experiment by the state. Whilst they tended to believe that the state had a big impact on their lives, they felt it was unresponsive and this was connected to very low levels of political efficacy expressed by our respondents. In other words, the young people in our sample did not see the state as irrelevant to their everyday lives, rather they did not believe that they could have any impact on it.

For instance, we conducted a group interview with seven 16-year old males, who were a mix of White, Black and mixed ethnicity³⁵ and had recently finished, or were coming to the end of, their school studies. These responses produced a discourse on the nature of politics which was characterised by themes of authority, lack of autonomy and exclusion from public spaces. Their definition of politics included any activity in which they were affected by the government. Thus, they suggested that all things connected with the government were political and these were also heavily associated with authority relationships, such as with police and teachers, or coercive interventions. Their subsequent suggestions about types of political participation also reflected activities where one was affected by government or the police, rather than activities in which one participated in order to affect or influence government. So, for instance, the group had decided that an image of boarded-up houses used in the interview process had a campaigning purpose, which was to put pressure on the Council to address the problem of homelessness. However, when they were asked to differentiate between those images they considered to be related to politics, and those they did not, they placed this image in the *non-political* pile.

We worked also with a group of New Dealers composed of men and women aged 17 to 23, who were Black, White and Asian, some with children, and all, by virtue of their participation in the New Deal (welfare-to-work) scheme, in receipt of benefits. The views of the political among these participants were dominated by themes of neglect and exclusion. The themes which emerged were the sense that government failed in its duties, politicians were remote and their life-chances were very much dependent on their own resources or the support of family networks (or the lack of such support), whilst some groups were able to unfairly claim resources (including single mothers and asylum-seekers). Interestingly, the group took a very wide-ranging definition of politics, which they related to either coercive interventions from the government or the

³⁵ I have here employed a broad categorisation of respondents' ethnicity, thus 'Black' in this context refers to participants of Black African or Caribbean origin; 'White' refers to participants of White Irish, Scottish, Welsh or English origin, and 'Asian' refers to participants of Pakistani, Afghanistani, Bangladeshi or Indian origin. The distinctive aspects of participants' identities were explored in the individual interviews, such as how they chose to describe themselves, how they negotiated their identities, and the aspects of their identity where they felt strong affiliations, conflicts or confusion.

withholding, or unfair distribution, of resources. For example, when showed an image of a football fan, they defined this as a political image for two reasons: firstly, due to the police presence at football matches and their role in controlling the crowds; and, secondly, due to the extremely high salaries paid to footballers.

We conducted a group interview with some sixth-formers, aged 16 to 18, who were all male, White and predominantly working-class. The themes that emerged from this interview centred around issues of race, patriotism and identity. Their discussions revealed a strong concern with identity issues (manifested by a preoccupation with patriotism) and a sense that they were marginalised from, indeed threatened by, current debates on race and identity. A second key theme to emerge from this discussion was the strong sense of generational differences – in particular they were highly conscious of their lack of status as young people and their exclusion from public spaces and decision-making processes. Like the first group of young men discussed above, they defined politics as anything to do with government, including the running of schools, hospitals and the police. In common with the first group, their view of politics was characterised by a sense that politics was something that affected them, but which they did not, or could not, affect themselves.

A group interview with male and female, Black and White, young homeless people living in a ‘foyer’ type of hostel³⁶ produced a discourse on the political that was characterised by neglect and exclusion. For this group, receipt of benefits and living in temporary accommodation created a situation where they felt they were self-reliant but without the means of achieving self-determination. A strong theme of the responses was that the government, or often ‘the system’, conspired against the achievement of self-determination, although the group placed a great deal of importance on the ability to achieve things for oneself without relying on others or the State. They suggested that politics was about being able to express one’s views and demands, but felt there were significant constraints on their opportunities to do so.

LIFE-CYCLE EFFECTS

This perceived inability to have any impact on the state can be seen as being quite closely related to life-cycle effects. In this section, I argue that there are particular factors attaching to young people that have an impact on their political engagement. The first is the way in which youth itself operates as an obstacle to participation in mainstream politics. The second relates to a failure within political arenas and participation research to take account of young people’s political interests.

The problem of political exclusion

With regard to the first factor, Bang notes that contemporary democracies now face particular problems of political exclusion, which he attributes to the uncoupling between lay people and formal spheres of politics due to the increased complexity of governance. In large part, this is exacerbated by the reliance on expert citizens in patterns of self and co-governance. So, paradoxically, whilst culture governance tends to hold that the ‘most effective forms of connection between social research and policy-making are forged through an extended process of communication between researchers,

³⁶ This type of accommodation is made available to young homeless people on condition that they undertake education or training.

policy-makers and those affected by whatever issues under consideration', it 'has the consequence of ignoring those everyday narratives and forms of life that do not possess this kind of specialisation.'³⁷ According to Bang, under the new culture governance regime, with its emphasis in interaction and expertise, everyday makers are more likely to become non-participants.

There are, however, additional problems of political exclusion, which Bang does not identify, in the sense that young everyday makers may well find that the bureaucratic expertise-driven mode of politics that pertain under culture governance have limited relevance to their own lives, but even when they do have relevance, young people face additional obstacles to their participation.

Thus, young people are rarely acknowledged as expert citizens – even in relation to issues which do affect them and there is marked tendency to view young people's participation in governance networks or political institutions as forms of political apprenticeship, rather than as a means of articulating their interests or concerns. This is captured in the UK in the Young People's Parliament model. This is a young people's deliberative assembly, which has been established in numerous towns and cities across Britain, and is based on a model of participation that is almost entirely didactic – none of the decisions taken have any binding effect on politicians or decision-makers. The debates within these assemblies are, rather, intended to educate young people and participation in them is posited as a means of increasing young people's self-confidence and political literacy – rather than as a means of articulating and mobilising around young people's political interests. In this model, participation is seen as a deferred activity and young people are regarded as *future* citizens.³⁸

Indeed, there is rather limited impetus for governance structures to directly engage young people in decision-making processes as deliberators or experts. Matthews and Limb note that although the Children Act 1989 requires local authorities to take into account the views of children in respect to certain court hearings and local authority decisions, generally there is no legal requirement on education authorities, schools, health and local authorities, parents or governments to give consideration to the 'ascertainable wishes and feelings of children.'³⁹

This tendency to see young people's participation as a form of political apprenticeship has meant that young people's voices have been much neglected in the literature and in political arenas, where there has been a greater focus on introducing stylistic changes to the ways in which politics is communicated in attempts to engage young people (such as using Geri Halliwell in election broadcasts, or introducing voting by text messaging) – rather than communicating with young people on the issues that affect them.

In this respect, the relationship between young people's everyday making politics and the external structures that shape and constrain them needs to be analysed. Philo and Smith see this as relationship between macro-Politics, i.e. the institutions and processes of the state and formal political organisations, and micro-politics of everyday life, or the

³⁷ Bang, (2003) op.cit. p. 250.

³⁸ Michael Wyness, Lisa Harrison and Ian Buchanan, 'Childhood, Politics and Ambiguity: Towards an Agenda for Children's Political Inclusion' in *Sociology*, (2004) vol. 38, no. 1, pp. 81-99.

³⁹ Hugh Matthews and Melanie Limb, 'Another White Elephant? Youth Councils as Democratic Structures' in *Space and Polity*, (2003) vol. 7, no. 2, p. 174.

personal politics of identity where individuals seeks to gain a sense of themselves and their place in the world and to gain power over their immediate conditions of existence.⁴⁰ They note that macro-Politics has tended to be colonised by adults, whilst young people's politics have tended to be seen in terms of everyday, self-actualising micro-politics. But, they argue, that young people's micro-politics of identity are often shaped by adult-centred macro-Politics; thus: 'the message is not that politics should be redefined *solely* in terms of the personal and localised experiences of...young people...we should concentrate on connections between the micro and the macro'. In other words, they caution *against* collapsing the political into the personal.

Young people's sense of political exclusion

The structuring effects of macro-Politics on young people's participation can be seen in the ways in which adult attitudes towards young people's participation inhibit their participation in decision-making processes, and this was something that was keenly felt among our respondents. There was a strong theme in many of the group and individual interviews that young people generally are excluded or marginalised from decision-making processes *because of their age*. There was an acute sense that young people are poorly represented at national and local levels and with regard to decision and policy-making, it was frequently observed that young people are rarely consulted or listened to – even with respect to issues which directly affect them, such as the introduction of AS levels,⁴¹ the types of training courses they could access on New Deal, decisions about local amenities or community events and so on. More worryingly, there was a recurring sense that young people would not be taken seriously even if they were to participate in the discussions of decision-making bodies:

I think, say if like there is twenty people my age and they wanted a meeting with [politicians] and twenty adults wanted a meeting with them to discuss the local area, I think they would definitely go with the adults, and they always say on TV we listen to the kids and stuff and you see the kids [being interviewed] and that, that's only because the camera is in front of them... Otherwise they wouldn't want to know... maybe if the whole community got together and kids did gather some ideas then maybe but probably not, I wouldn't have thought so anyway, but... even if they did call meetings they wouldn't let people our age know anyway.

Male, Sixth-former, 18, White, individual interview

Many respondents felt that stereotyped and negative perceptions of young people were common among adults and these acted as barriers both to young people's entry into political arenas and also to their effectiveness within them:

⁴⁰ Chris Philo and Fiona M. Smith, 'Political Geographies of Children and Young People' in *Space and Polity*, (2003) vol. 7, no. 2,

⁴¹ In 2001 the Department for Education phased out the standard post-16 qualification, the A (Advanced) level (based on a two-year full-time course) and replaced it with a two-tier qualification, comprising the AS and A2 levels (where the one-year AS course results in a stand-alone qualification, which may lead to entry to a further one-year A2 course to achieve a full A' level). This reform was not piloted and the first generation of completers received their results in 2002 amid controversy over the marking criteria and allegations that thousands of students had been unfairly marked down. Following re-marking of over 90,000 entries, 1,945 students were awarded higher grades, see Department for Education and Skills news release: www.dfes.gov.uk/qualifications/news.cfm?page=0&id=89 (accessed 15.10.02).

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they would kind of have the idea that the young are very sort of hot-headed, and you know, sort of react to things as they happen, and don't think about it as carefully as maybe older people would, so they wouldn't have as much respect from people on the Council as they need to get what they wanted.

Female, Sixth-former, 18, White, individual interview

A number felt that they were not encouraged to participate in politics, commenting that they were not invited to join groups, they rarely had their opinions solicited, nor were they provided with the information to participate:

I know I have no-one talking to me about politics, I don't know much about it, I have no knowledge of it, I have no-one to instigate it or to, you know, say do you want to come and vote?

Male, Homeless, 21, White, individual interview

I just don't think young people are encouraged to show their opinions in terms of associating themselves with a group. Show your opinion, you know so you can sit around in a group with someone from the government and tell them your opinion, but you can't, it's like you're not encouraged to join groups.

Female, Sixth-former, 18, White, individual interview

Despite the sense that young people were routinely excluded from power, or marginalized within political arenas, there was a common perception that young people's perspectives and concerns needed to be represented and listened to – either because young people had experience of the issues that affected them, or because they were able to understand their peer-group better than adults, or because they were a source of fresh ideas and solutions. Thus there was a strong perception that representation by young people for young people was crucial for having their concerns addressed (a perception that applied similarly to representation by and for women and ethnic minorities):

it's actually working with the people, not just assuming what can help, but actually finding out, taking the time to spend with the young people, which is what matters today is the young people, you know, and find answers and improvements, and that's the best way to go about it, work with the young not the old, they're moulding the life for us, and we don't want that, we want to mould it ourselves and all these old people are out there voting for us and they really have no idea where they're going, they really have no idea what they're doing for us. You know, the way they're making the life for us... You need to work with younger people more, that's what matters.

Male, Homeless, 21, White, individual interview

I think younger people, kind of, when it comes to issues that involve young people and drugs, you know, that sort of thing, even young people that don't, that aren't involved in that kind of thing, because they are in, they might be in the environment where they know it happens, they're the kind of better people to ask over how you would solve those issues, rather than someone, you know, sat in an office somewhere in London in a suit, you know, that's not there, or remembers maybe what it was like when they were young and how to deal with it from that point of view. You need kind of a more up-to-date thing.

Female, Sixth-former, 18, White, individual interview

Generally, our data suggest that young people feel that politics is something that is done unto them:

I think the government make a lot of decisions and I think that in a lot of them, the public feel angry and you feel like you have no power to control what's happening.

Male, University student, 21, White, individual interview

Young people's interests

As argued above, there is a need to establish a better understanding of young people's interests in order to gain a sense of what is distinctive about young people's political concerns compared with other cohorts. Many issues that are traditionally seen as being of concern to young people, such as the environment or animal rights, do not seem to occupy a particularly prominent position in the data generated by recent research,⁴² indeed these issues were not mentioned by our respondents as issues of political interest or concern. A number of common concerns were expressed across our groups, however, which were viewed by our respondents as political, such as concerns about racism, sexism,⁴³ problems with public services, crime and so on. There were also a number of issues that concerned our respondents that seemed to relate specifically to their experiences as young people in transition to adulthood,⁴⁴ such as teenage sex, pregnancy and parenthood or opportunities for education, training and employment, or resources within local communities for young people. For many of our respondents, these were seen as political issues as revealed in the discussions during the sorting exercises and follow-up interviews.

For example, many discussions about the political aspects of young people's experiences of and views about teenage sex, pregnancy and parenthood were prompted by the use in the group interviews of an image of a young woman holding a baby. All of our respondents interpreted the image as that of a teenage single mother and nearly all decided that this image portrayed a political issue, for a variety of reasons. For some, this was about the lack of material support from the state for single mothers, with many commenting on hardship as a generalised aspect of teenage parenthood due to insufficient benefits, inadequate housing and the lack of support to pursue education or employment. Others felt this was a political issue because of the unwillingness of the state or schools to equip young people with the information and self-confidence to deal with, or avoid getting into, such a situation. Many suggested that the government and the educational system failed to inform people of the practical or emotional aspects of sexual relationships, and the responsibilities of parenthood:

there definitely needs to be something done about that. Education... you know, not enough education to do with sex. You get taught about your reproductive organs and stuff like... the fallopian tubes and the ovaries and the eggs and stuff like that: how do you like them – scrambled or fertilised? Yeah, but something definitely needs to be done about that, you know what I mean? And it's not just down to the parents, it's down to the government as well, the educational system.

Male, New Dealer, 23, White, parent, individual interview

sex education in school, it's too basic, what they tell you is, oh the sperm does this, the egg does that, it doesn't actually tell you the whole process of what can happen, will happen, if you have unprotected sex and all the rest of it, it's just mad.

Female, New Dealer, 19, Black, individual interview

A number of respondents also felt there was a social resistance towards addressing this issue adequately – with an unwillingness on the part of adults generally to speak to

⁴² Henn, et.al., op.cit.; Norris, op.cit.

⁴³ These findings were similar to those in Alison Park's report, op.cit.

⁴⁴ Furlong and Cartmel, op.cit.; Bob Coles, *Youth and Social Policy: Youth Citizenship and Young Careers*, (1995) UCL Press, London.

young people about sex in a frank or relevant way – a view reflected in research into young people’s experiences of sex and relationship education and information:⁴⁵

the English prudence, the stiff-upper lip, try to ignore it, but you know it’s an everyday thing. There’s a baby born every minute... and then they start complaining when their kids get pregnant at 13, 14. ... They know it’s going on, but they don’t want to believe it’s going on.

Male, New Dealer, 23, White, parent, individual interview

There was a very clearly gendered aspect to the views expressed about the politics of teenage parenthood. Women, particularly, tended to blame poor levels of general education for early pregnancies and considered the blow that this represented to acquiring further educational achievements as especially debilitating for women. Whilst many were critical of those women who had begun families at a young age, they also blamed the government for doing too little for women in this situation and felt that the government preferred to dump single mothers onto benefits, rather than do anything to cultivate their educational aspirations. The disproportionate responsibility borne by young women in this situation was a political issue for many, with both men and women commenting on the state’s culpability for the negative impact that teenage pregnancy had on the life-chances of young women and the children of teenage or single parents.

With regard to problems in accessing employment, training or education, many felt that the state did not do enough to support young people. Government supported youth employment schemes and supported-employment opportunities, for instance, were regarded as very poorly-paid and exploitative, with the types of employment options and training offered as too narrow, and often acting as disincentives to come off benefit:

get a training course, where you’re gonna earn crap money, but you still work for your giro [welfare cheque] and you work 40 hours a week and you are only getting your giro, or get a job for £3.60, for your national minimum wage and you have to work a couple of years before you get experience, which is pants. It shouldn’t be like that. There’s always moaning that you need experience and that, but no-one’s willing to take you on to give you the experience, unless you work on a Modern Apprenticeship, it’s just no good. And you want a Modern Apprenticeship and you’re taking home £45 a week and you’re doing 40 hours, you know, that’s like £1.10 an hour, you know, that wouldn’t encourage me to work, to be honest. I wouldn’t wanna work 40 hours for 45, I’d just be thinking, I’d just be dossing to be honest... they’re doing more apprenticeships and that, instead of just trying to claim dole and getting crappy jobs working in factories and then later on in life realising that they don’t want it, and then having to go to college when they’re 20, 30 and that. The government should definitely do something about that.

Male, New Dealer, 23, White, individual interview

Furthermore, where the outcomes were not successful, the costs of failure were very high:

⁴⁵ C. Dennison, A. Crosier, J. Goodrich, D. McVey & S. Forrest, *Involving Young People in Peer Education: A Guide to Establishing Sex and Relationships Peer Education Groups*, (2002) Department of Health, London.

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then I lost my job and that's how it goes... And it's hard to pick yourself back up after that, because it was like I give it my all, you know, I got my flat, everything was nice... and your job's working out, your train is getting there, and then you fall ill, and then you've got no money because you get the sack and you're in arrears with housing benefit, I was in all that, normally had no food, everything just crashed down, it was like harder, I'd give it my all, I did my best and this is how it has ended up. It's the instability that I'm left with.

Male, Homeless, 21, White, individual interview

Whilst the young people participating in the New Deal scheme that we spoke to were positive about the centre that they attended, and generally of the New Deal Advisors, they tended to be quite critical of the framework of the scheme, as well as other government-supported training. Many felt that the options available on the New Deal Scheme, particularly with regard to the type and range of training on offer, were insufficient. Some felt that the scheme acted as a barrier to the career aspirations, and pigeon-holed them:

this New Deal thing that Tony Blair has come up with, it's not for everybody, it does not suit everybody's needs. It basically puts everybody in a little box and expects them to go either this way or that way. It doesn't work for everybody... You have to treat people as individuals, not just a little group so that everybody does have the opportunity to do something.

Female, New Dealer, 19, Black, individual interview

The lack of resources for young people within their local communities was also a source of concern for many: especially, but not exclusively, for young men. Many commented on the lack of youth centres or their inability to access local community centres. For some this was an issue that affected young people in terms of their likelihood to become involved in crime. For others, there was a sense that the lack of local resources and community facilities for young people discouraged their inclusion within local affairs, commonly this was associated with their exclusion from local spaces and having a say about how resources could be used to benefit their age-groups:

I think [the reason why there aren't enough facilities for young people is] mainly because of the politicians, there's no real young ones, in our area anyway. I think the woman... in our area who was trying to go for it last year, and she was for Labour, I think she won it, and she's 45-50 herself, she's got the experience, but she's too old, she doesn't realise what youth is like today. She just puts herself back to where she was young, you know, but times have changed. Like crimes coming up and everything. They need a centre somewhere, 20 hours a day I'd say, 6 days a week, cut the crime down.

Male, Sixth-former, 18, White, individual interview

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, our research found that young people are not politically apathetic, although they are disengaged from mainstream politics. In this respect, our findings support those of other studies. Yet, what was missing from many studies is a satisfactory answer to the question: why is young people's participation different to that of other cohorts? Henrik Bang's work assists in identifying some of the ways in which the changing political environment itself shapes political participation and our data certainly supports much of what he suggests about the emergence of everyday maker modes of participation. Our respondents were, by and large, disengaged from mainstream, electoral and party politics and were clearly much more likely to be active and engaged in local community politics and issues. They also often saw politics as a

form of self-actualisation (and their inability to conceive of themselves participating in the national, mainstream sphere is compounded by the low visibility of politicians who look like themselves).

Yet, the notion that they are disengaged from the state is not supported by our data – rather I suggest that young people do view the state as shaping their life-chances and experiences, but their unwillingness to engage in state-oriented political action is a demonstration of their very low levels of political efficacy. In this respect, I argue that age to an extent structures young people’s political participation, particularly in the ways in which it operates as an obstacle to their participation. Thus, Philo and Smith’s warning against collapsing the political into the personal is a useful one, that alerts us to the need to address some of the specific processes and factors that give rise to young people’s political exclusion (and one could draw similar conclusions in relation to ethnicity and so on).

Our understanding of young people’s non-participation therefore should take account of both changes in the political environment that give rise to shifts in the ways in which young people politically engage (i.e. generation effects), as well as the life-cycle effects that operate as structural constraints on their political participation.

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