
Book Review

Sarah Pickard and Judith Bessant (eds.) (2018) *Young People Re-Generating Politics in Times of Crises*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. 410 pages.

Youth political engagement is a very well researched topic not just in Europe but across the world. Where Pickard and Bessant excel is the broad range that this edition covers. It starts with a very expansive description of the *Political* itself and it helps the authors in exploring youth civic engagements from the mainstream and traditional all the way to the progressives as well as the radicals. Even whilst dealing with this wide range of topics, the authors succeed in structuring the book to perfection not just in challenging the stereotypical portrayal of young people as *apolitical*, but also in the myriad portrayals of their civic engagements themselves. The benefit of such an approach is that it includes formal as well as informal modes of youth participation; however, the limitation of this approach is that it equates the civic to the political.

One of the major emphases of this book is that even though young people find themselves disenchanted with the current political systems, it does not result in them becoming passive politically, instead it only makes them passive towards the traditional modes of political participation, therefore opening the door to a broader description of the political. Throughout the various chapters in the book, the authors attempt to bring out into the mainstream the non-traditional, sometimes underground or even the illegal modes of participation of the youth in various regions of the world. Times of crisis bring out the best as well as the worst among humans and it has similar effects on youth as well. As much as youth involvement in crime increases, it also leads to an increase in their civic engagements (White and Cunneen, 2015). Various chapters in the edition bring about a multitude of modes through which young people exercise their political agencies in different regimes, both mature democracies and otherwise.

The four themes that the authors have identified in order to classify various modes of the *Political* that young people identify with matches with the broad description of the political itself and at the same time is able to justify the non-traditional methods used by young people in their activism. The book is also very relevant today because of the crisis filled last three decades of our lives. The 1990s started with the gulf war and created an environment of perpetual strife in the Middle East. The 2000s started with this strife expanding its tentacles into the living rooms as far as New York with the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Centre and Pentagon and the subsequent war on terror. The Neo-Liberal policy regime led to the global financial crisis in 2008 and at the same time the climate of the world has taken a turn for the worse.

Youth in every corner of this globalised world have been directly or indirectly affected by these continuing crises. In today's world, with rising unemployment, devaluation of acquired skills, devaluation of educational degrees and diplomas, and rising student debt a large proportion of young people would be categorised into Standing's precariat (Gouglas, 2013). In some cases, the result has been quite disappointing with young people getting radicalised and even getting involved into subversive activities, but as the authors point out very successfully through the various qualitative studies conducted in different parts of the world, young people have more often than not found a way to express their anxiety through the civic and the political.

As pointed out earlier, the authors divide the book into four parts: student activism, online activism, community building, and political protests. In part 1 of the book the authors deal with the most common and also the most important mode of youth participation, student activism. Chapters 2, 3, 4 and 5 deal with various kinds of student movements in Africa and North America ranging from issues like environmental activism in Kenya, to violence, use of weapons and corporeal punishments meted out to young students in Los Angeles Unified School District in USA, the unaffordable tuition fees black students were forced to pay in South African Universities and a broad opposition to neo-liberal policies of the state that adversely affected students in Quebec, Canada. The four qualitative studies bring about important aspects of how students mobilise and what factors lead to such mobilizations irrespective of the final outcome. The studies show that contrary to popular opinion students may not believe in the traditional political institutions, but they still have faith in their own mobilization capabilities and are willing to make sacrifices to achieve their goals. For Black South African students, it was important to highlight the fact that in spite of the end to apartheid, the white minority was still privileged. The leaders may have wanted to unite the white and black South Africa together, but black students were very clear in their view that without achieving economic equality, it was impossible to achieve any other kind of equal treatment. Similarly, for young school kids in Los Angeles (especially Hispanics) it was difficult to comprehend that they could be arrested and imprisoned for being truant. Even more appalling was the fact that the school district acquired armoured vehicles and automatic weapons to arm the school security in order to deal with truant kids. The students in Kenya felt that the traditional modes of politics were for sycophants and it was important for them to be professionals rather than political and for these young people therein lies the success of their activism.

In chapter 5, the authors present the results of a qualitative study of 20 young people in the Quebec province of Canada, and uncover the vast majority of underground and non-traditional modes of protest and activism, including illegal graffiti, and cultural movements like punk/skinheads and anarchists. The authors discuss in detail why the youth believe that all political parties will only ever follow a neo-liberal policy framework and therefore participating in the traditional forms of political institutions is useless to them. Although, the study revealed the vast repertoire of activism that young people are involved in the small sample of

interviews left a lot to be desired in terms of methodological representation. The 20 youth who were interviewed may have been involved in such forms of activism, however, whether it is an accurate representation of the youth in Quebec particularly or in Canada generally is doubtful.

Part 2 of the book deals with the most popular form of activism today, online activism. The authors start with the umbrella movement in Hong Kong and the Momentum and Corbynistas in the UK and finally go on to explore the extreme Right like the Daily Stormer and even the radicalization of the Muslim youth and how they deal with it by cracking ethnically charged jokes and memes online. In the case of Hong Kong, the young people already had a huge online presence and were using various online forums to exchange their views. When the umbrella movement started, it did so with the exchange of ideas on such underground forums as were used by the youth in Hong Kong to exchange pornography. The authors very succinctly extend Habermas' public sphere to the online public sphere in discussing how the hash tags, memes and the keyboard fighters dominated the politics during the Occupy movement.

Chapter 8 brings out the brazen methods of the young populists who are actively involved in creating propaganda material online, trolling, personal insults through the use of post-truth politics and alternative facts. The radicalisation of Muslim youth in the west discussed in chapter 9, firstly criticises the change in the semantic description of radical and compares it to the radical civil rights movements in the USA and then goes on to critically analyse the various stereotypes that young Muslims face on a daily basis with regards to their appearance and clothing from a Foucauldian perspective.

In part 3 of the book the authors deal with youth involvement in community building. The Gezi movement in Turkey where more than 50 per cent of the protestors occupying the Gezi park were aged 25 or below, and authors highlight how the movement turned into a struggle against conservative policies that promoted restrictions especially on women's bodily functions and practices in the model family way. Chapter 12 again discusses the non-traditional modes of youth activism especially through voluntary work in Australia. The chapter recognises that despite voting being mandatory in Australia, like most other democracies the number of young people registering to vote was declining after the effects of the economic crisis led to an increase in unemployment. However, the young people may have lost faith in the traditional political institutions that were only interested in austerity measures; they were very much involved in the political through solidarity institutions and voluntary work. Similar austerity policies led to the young Scotsmen targeting the right-wing Westminster government which was inclined to blame immigrants for the loss of jobs due to its own austerity policies and the 2008 economic crisis. The authors successfully use the late modernist and post-modernist approaches in explaining how and why young people today are not inclined to follow the beaten path of traditional political methods but are involved in a more radical, non-traditional, post-materialistic approach based on community networking and volunteering.

Various forms of political protest dealt with in part 4 of the book bring to the fore the more visible and reactionary form of the political that young people everywhere around the world readily identify with. One of the biggest issues with the way democracy works is that it almost always politically marginalises certain groups, especially minorities. When these minority groups are unable to have their issues resolved through the traditional representative platforms, they are inevitably forced to make their demands visible through protests, marches, demonstrations and blockades which will then force the political elites to pay attention to the voices of the marginalised.

What forms the background for chapter 16 is even more relevant at the time of writing this review because of the ongoing Black Lives Matter protests in the USA. At the time this chapter was written these protests had not taken the form and the extent that they have taken today. These protests were localised and most participants were people of colour. Today it is no longer a minority issue, the participation of young people from all over the world has brought this movement into the mainstream and it just goes on to prove the point of the authors that youth political actions are bringing marginalised issues into the mainstream of politics.

In chapter 17 the authors attempt to expand the definition of democracy itself and introduce agnostic democracy 'as a source of transgressive enjoyment [...] to solicit democratic engagement, in a way that more banal, procedural versions of democracy, with their limited focus on regular "free and fair" elections' (Bright et al., 2018: 317) are unable to provide. The ethnographic study not only establishes that young people recognise the plurality of opinions, but also the fact that such decisions or choices always come at a cost. The apathy among the youth that we are so clearly able to see, is not towards the political itself but towards the political defined by the narrow neo-liberal procedural democracy that they are forced to exist within.

The same idea is further explored in chapter 18 by introducing Rosanvallon's 'mutations of democracy'. It critically looks at why young people are more and more inclined to lose faith in traditional liberal democracy and for them political participation or doing politics is much more than making speeches on town squares or making petitions to the elected representatives.

After reading the book, the question that comes first to mind is if there is any other kind of democracy that exists anywhere in the world, that is not liberal, representative and procedural in character? And this brings us to an even more important question; if we can describe political in such a broad manner, is it any different from the civic then? Furthermore, where does it leave any space for ideologies in the political? Another limitation of this book lies in its methodology. There is no doubt that qualitative work has the strength of looking very critically and in depth into issues under consideration and the authors have done an exceptionally good job in bringing to the fore the various kinds of political participation that young people are involved in around the world today. However, it does leave the question of being representative open to critique. A million visits

to an online portal at the height of a protest do not necessarily mean that a million young people were active participants.

The biggest limitation of the book though lies in it completely ignoring the fact that young people may be more attracted to non-traditional or radical modes of political because they do not have to worry about the burdens of social life at a young age. People in their 40s and above have to feed their families, consider the future prospects of their kids and are more motivated by their personal social commitments rather than the prospect of political participation.

For anyone who wishes to understand in detail the intricacies of youth political participation today, why young people are disenchanted with the traditional public sphere and are looking to expand the concept of democracy itself to a new political through non-traditional and radical modes of participation and activism, this is the perfect book. Despite the limitations pointed out above, the book covers almost every aspect of young peoples' political participation and describes in detail how young people feel and engage themselves in the unorthodox ways that they create and share amongst each other.

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