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The Trouble with Civic: a snapshot of young people's civic and political engagements in twenty-first century democracies

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Introduction

The idea that young people are disengaged from politics and civil society, indeed from the entire public sphere – either through no fault of their own, systemic constraints or because of something that typifies that particular age-group – has become something of a mantra now in this field and it is almost unthinkable not to state it at least in passing at the beginning of books, articles or funding proposals. My current project, *Civicweb: Young People, the Internet and Civic Engagement* is no exception. Indeed, in the last two decades alone, hundreds of papers, books and reports in diverse fields have been written with the aim of delineating what civic participation should be, why citizens in general and young people in particular are failing in terms of civic participation (particularly voting), and how these trends should be prevented. Meanwhile, other analyses of this topic set out with the intention of challenging the orthodoxy and conclude by finding in young people a vibrant stratum of the population that is outstripping older peers in terms of innovative democratic engagement. Acknowledging the recurrent fault lines between different stances on young people and civic culture, Lance Bennett even writes of 'two different paradigms that contrast young citizens…as either reasonably active and *engaged* or relatively passive and *disengaged'* (2008: 2). His carefully nuanced discussion proceeds in an attempt to describe and bridge the oppositions he has identified.

Taking its cue from some of the empirical and theoretical concerns outlined, but coming at the issues from a different angle, this article is *speculative* in outlook and aims to raise questions with regard to three aspects of current discourse. Initially, drawing on the findings of my recent research into youth civic activity represented on civic websites for the project Civicweb[i], it aims to question both the notion that young people the least civically engaged section of society regardless of context and the idea that they are outstripping older generations in the creativity and extent of their civic engagement online. Second, in the context of questions about the necessary and actual relationships between civic engagement, action and political or governmental reaction in the wake of the 2003 UK and US-led attack on Iraq, it aims to

problematise the notion that voting in elections, support for a political party and trust in government are always worthy indicators or young people's democratic civic engagement. And third, but central to the whole article, the aim here is to raise questions about the idea that civic and political engagement and action are necessarily benign and democratic and hence always desirable goals for young people. To historicise these discussions, the next section takes a brief and partial look some of the rhetorical trends with regard to citizenship and participation in the UK.

From rights to duties: the civic imperative

Why has the idea of youth apathy and citizen disengagement been the focus of such attention in recent years? While, as Kathy Edwards (2007) points out, in discussions of trends in western democracies, young people are castigated for not turning out in huge numbers to vote, low voter turnout is a phenomenon that affects other age-groups too and so cannot be the only explanation. The notion of citizenship itself has a complex and individual history in the twentieth century in the UK, as in other countries, and as Ruth Lister explains (1998: 310-311), has tended to move in historical waves that establish different balances between individualistic and communitarian, rights based and duty led outlooks. The common thread between different waves has been a reluctance to differentiate between the relationships of different categories or groups of citizens to each other and to the state. This is the case even with trends in the 1990s, which saw New Labour attempting to bridge gaps between people's experiences of life in communities and their assumed aspirations for individual advancement: 'Tony Blair's first exposition of the meaning of socialism (or social-ism as he chose to recast it), on taking up the leadership of the party, set out his interpretation of the 'Left view of citizenship' and included 'the equal worth of each citizen' as one of the values of democratic socialism' (Lister 1998: 312). Lister suggests, furthermore, that when it comes to a range of 'Big Ideas' supposedly offered by the New Labour government in the 1990s, few were as embedded in the language of citizenship as that of 'community'. Indeed, she notes that in referring to 'community' the vocabulary was one of 'responsibility and obligation'. This, she argues, reflects the influence on New Labour:

> both of popular communitarianism, as expounded by Amitai Etzioni and David Selbourne, and of a British tradition of ethical Christian socialism. It is an expression of what David Marquand (1996) has called 'a new kind of moral collectivism' on the centre-left…The

statement of values, which replaced the totemic Clause IV of the party's constitution, offers a new ideal of a 'community... where the rights we enjoy reflect the duties we owe', a formulation which implies that duties exist morally and logically prior to rights. This New Labour mantra echoes the deployment of the language of citizenship obligation by Conservative ministers in the 1980s. It also reflects a more deep-rooted paradigm shift in which the discourse of citizenship draws increasingly upon the lexicon of obligations rather than rights. (Lister, 1998: 313)

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

Lister's pithy overview provides a backdrop that more than predicts the ways in which the choice to keep any sort of distance from those avowedly working to fulfil the vision of a united community of Great Britain (or any other nation state with a similar recent history, for that matter) might be interpreted as, or translated into, a rhetoric about disengagement, apathy and depoliticisation. Quite evidently there are fewer people under the age of 25 in positions of power in government or with access to government than there are 26 to 60 year olds. Without a doubt the dismantling of manufacturing industries (begun under the Thatcher Government, continued by successive Blair governments), the undermining of trade-unionism and the rights of public sector workers, and the failure of radical left politics to invite or convince a broad spectrum of the UK population have left a kind of vacuum in politics which means that there are no easily available, inviting and evidently effective alternatives to established parties and politicians for young people to turn to. Indeed, a number of young people do express boredom or lack of interest (Coleman 2005: 8), cynicism (Buckingham 2000) and/or mistrust (Cushion 2007a) in relation to politicians, political parties and government. Reminding us that young people's lives are crosscut by social factors, some middle and upper-middle class youth contributing comments to the websites of the Liberal Democrats, Labour and the Conservative Party, themselves subscribe to the sorts of individualist or communitarian rhetoric they have grown up hearing. In our recent report across six European countries and Turkey (Civicweb, deliverable

6), the trend was for young people to be more suspicious of and unlikely to trust Government and formal politics than some older people and in some instances, there was a growing disaffection from electoral politics in sections of the population other than but also including youth. But does this add up to the kind of overwhelming lack of interest in a broader politics and civil society that has frequently been attributed to them? The next section looks briefly at some of the ways in which UK youth appear to be engaging in the public sphere, especially as it is manifested on the internet.

UK youth, websites and the civic sphere

While the benevolent and democratic nature of civic participation is rarely questioned (see next section), in more recent academic writing there are more specific theoretical debates being played out about government, participation and the potentials or actual uses of new technologies for enhancing youth engagement. Montgomery et al (2004) and Dahlgren (2006, 2007) have carried out fascinating descriptive studies which examine the particular uses young people are making of civic websites in the US and Sweden respectively. Anita Harris (2004) sees flaws in traditional political participation as being as much about politicians and the establishment as about the behaviour or values of young people and Stephen Coleman (2001, 2005) uses young people's own responses to examine new technologies of mixing and digital cultures for methods of communicating politically that resonate with young people. Sonia Livingstone (Livingstone, Bober and Helsper, 2005) and Neil Selwyn (2007), meanwhile, examine critically some minutiae of the digital civic and political communication occurring for young people on the internet, testing out hypotheses about changes in communication practices and social engagement wrought by technological changes. What these theorists share, however, is a concern that young people should be represented positively, or at least accurately and fairly in terms of their civic participation, whether it be on- or offline.

Based on a study of eighty UK civic websites and their associated organisations (sixty percent primarily youth orientated, forty percent more general in reach), groups or campaigns between January and August 2007, it becomes clear that people in the 15 to 25 age group are as keen to have their voices heard on a number of civic topics as their older peers and in some cases willing to give up significant amounts of time to campaigning. This supports evidence from a number of reports, several commissioned by the Carnegie Young People's Initiative (2001; Coleman and Rowe, 2005; Roker and Cox 2005). The environment, social discrimination,

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children's rights, war, terrorism, school and pedagogy, students' rights, employment and justice systems, global corporations and campaigns for sustainable development, sexuality, eating disorders, bullying and sexual abuse – are just some of the topics about which young people are engaging in heated debate and campaigning across this country. How they do this varies, just as the funding models and pedagogies of the websites vary, and many of the campaigns have a primarily offline civic action base – from local national and global meetings and networks both left and right-leaning, demonstrations and lobbies of parliament to direct action in relation to animal rights, human rights, pro and anti-hunting, strikes and pickets. But how do these activities link up with more traditional forms of politics such as orientations towards government and voting?

Insert Figure 1: Head's Up Forum Page

Insert Figure 2: B-Involved Home page

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

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

INSERT Figure 3: British Youth Council Home

Finally, there are a number of youth websites for organisations in whose rhetoric and invitations to political activity clearly anti-state and anti-capitalist or occasionally ethnic supremacist ideologies are at play. On these radical sites, civic participation for young people at its most basic level is perceived as a matter of the sceptical and critical decoding of mass media 'messages' and government rhetoric, running alternative media on or offline, leafleting and doing graffiti, challenging prejudice and injustice or the democratic process itself by calling demonstrations, sit-in, strikes, pickets, petitions, boycotts and discussion meetings. A small but significant number of radical sites view the foregoing actions as part of traditional politics and advocate in addition 'direct-action', which might be anything from repeatedly breaking 'unjust' copyright legislation by file-sharing, using only 'free' software, heckling parliamentarians, chaining wheelchairs to disabled-unfriendly thoroughfares, lying down in the road in front of army bases, releasing animals destined for slaughterhouses, beating up Pakistani shop keepers, or preventing animal testing facilities from carrying out their work, doing homophobic graffiti or physically preventing the hunting of animals. Clearly not all of these actions are comparable and some are not in the least democratic; nevertheless their advocates on the sites view them as civic or political action. Unusually for the online left groups, the *British Antifascist Network* implicitly makes violent action against neo-Nazis and Far Right cadre ('Bash the Fash') a clear aspect of civic/political action. Evangelical Christian youth groups meanwhile invite users to get

'sports' contests' and 'arts or drama' activities going with youth in 'deprived areas', and to have 'clinics' which will try to solve youth problems, but always with the codicil that these activities will be used as a means of 'spreading God's word' and 'bringing Jesus' to those who need him.

While rhetoric and pedagogy may differ between youth led and more established organisations run by older adults, in the online civic sphere surveyed here and the offline civic sphere it frequently represents, young people in the UK appear to match older peers in terms of a desire to communicate, research, debate, inform, suggest ideas, raise funds, protest and volunteer their time to particular causes and actions. The dominant tone in writing about young people and civic engagement across different fields including that of participation and new technologies, however, continues to be one that sees civic engagement under any circumstances as an unquestionable good, civic action as even better and almost as a logical corollary, young people as being troublingly in deficit when it comes to civic participation (Putnam 2000, Coughlan 2003, Galston 2004). But, if what is being suggested by research about young people and civil society is that all that is needed are further action and engagement by young people or if all politicians have to do to engage young people is alter their political communication style, then real problems with democracy and civic culture are probably falling through the cracks unnoticed. The next section takes the case of the UK protests over the attack on Iraq in 2003 suggests that making young people's assumed lack of interest/engagement out to be one of the biggest problems faced by democracies might be a dangerous precedent for the very democracies such arguments hope to infuse with new life.

Healthy democracy or destructive realpolitik: young citizens versus the state

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

Even if it is the case that those who suggest that all engagement and action are 'good' things are envisaging 'benevolent' action and 'pro-social' or 'pro-democratic' engagement, there are plenty of examples of political or civic outcomes that have conflicting and potentially undemocratic overtones for some people while being unquestionably democratic to others. Let us take what happened over the Iraq war as a case in point as it 'engaged' record numbers of

people, and young people amongst them (Cushion 2004, 2007 and 2007a). While the sense of anger and frustration about an impending unjust and illegal invasion of another country that led some two million people to protest not once but repeatedly at various locations across the UK from February 2003 onwards only deepened over the course of the following months, the sense of political efficacy engendered by these collective actions was short-lived. In fact, there is anecdotal evidence that various groups and individuals became increasingly disenchanted by both the official sanctions taken against them as groups or individuals for their actions and by the long-term effects of the government's propaganda and lack of responsiveness to the arguments and actions against a war (Noor 2007; Al-Ghabban 2007; Cushion 2007a).

Of the young people who 'chose' to take civic action by walking out of schools during lessons, or colleges during lectures – and there were some ten thousand of these in London alone on the day that the Blair government alongside US allies began the attack on Iraq – many found themselves facing exceptionally serious and authoritarian consequences the following day and even on the day of the invasion itself (Cushion 2004; Al-Ghabban 2004). Some schools locked their gates; others sent warning letters home to parents preceding the events and yet others carried out exclusions or suspensions following the events. The activist charity The Woodcraft Folk even suspected that it had its funding withdrawn because of its anti-war stance. Of the young people and adults who chose to write letters to their MPs, many received formal replies stating the Government's position on Weapon's of Mass Destruction at the time, or a formulaic note directing them to the text of a speech by the then Prime Minister Tony Blair justifying military action against Iraq. This clearly did not constitute reciprocal engagement on the part of the MPs but a standardized and bureaucratic response that curtailed debate. Worse still, a media environment seemingly supportive of young people's interest in the developing international situation prior to the attack on Iraq, became increasingly strident in its caricatures of the efforts of young citizens to oppose their government following the attack on Iraq. As Stephen Cushion notes, 'the dominant media frame shifted, once the war had commenced, with young protestors portrayed as opportunistic truants rather than (as pre-war) active, engaged citizens' (2007: abstract).

However, some would clearly argue that such (apparent) 'debate' over what is and is not allowable civic action, and what should or should not be a political path of action, strengthens a democracy. Yet, none of the actions mentioned prevented the military destruction of dozens of Iraqi cities, the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi civilians who would not otherwise have

died, the destruction of whatever nominal law and order existed in Iraq or the absolute destruction of Iraqi civil society so that now 'might is right' at a very visceral everyday level. Indeed, the sum total of civic actions taken and engagements founded in the UK around the Iraq war were ineffective when weighed in the balance against the reaction of government and the consequences of violent military intervention in the civic life of Iraq.

This is absolutely not to assert that the civic/political protests should not have happened or that the kind of campaigning experience they gave young people in the UK was not useful. Protests that are not listened to are most evidently still civic and as such still play a role in a democracy. Nor is this an argument suggesting that all governments should change democratically decided policies based solely on strong public sentiments. I merely suggest that, that in some contexts, relatively mild forms of civic action – and in this I include demonstrating and writing letters – which are tolerated by the authorities in most so-called democratic regimes, may sometimes serve to mask persistent injustice and inequality, or abuses of power. To be more specific, if these civic actions run counter to the wishes of the regime in power, and if young people or others participating in civic protest are arguing that the actions of that regime be rethought, curtailed or prevented entirely, (as was the case with many of the protests that erupted or were planned to attempt to prevent the attack on Iraq in 2003), they are often ineffective.

So, what role did the anti-Iraq war protests, particularly the contribution of young people, play? Did they limit the options open to the then Government in terms of the military aid it would render the US? Possibly, although it is difficult to imagine how much more aggressively involved the UK could have been in attacking Iraq. Did the civic protests cause the British Press to represent the plight of Iraqi civilians in a more balanced and humane manner? At times, I suggest, it is also possible that the incontrovertibly civic debates and actions taking place also served to strengthen the opinion that the UK establishment (and many of its more privileged citizens) has of the UK as a particularly open democracy compared to other places where, they argue, citizens are not allowed to demonstrate, complain about the government in newspaper articles or to write letters to elected Members of Parliament. Meanwhile, real problems with this particular democracy are passing mostly unchallenged (Cushion 2007a). Spontaneous cross-union strikes and pickets have been banned in this country, and many people have even forgotten that they once had the right and that it was a right someone had to fight for. Services that people once took for granted as being free and available to all – dental care, higher

education – have been dismantled and/or privatized; in the UK universal free and equal school education, long fought for, scarcely appreciated might soon be a thing of the past; the right to silence and the right to be presumed innocent until proven guilty are already under threat if you happen to be an ethnic minority citizen picked up in the wake of a terrorist attack or even the suggestion of one.

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

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

It is hard to miss the links between the type of 'personally responsible citizenship' described here and the Blairite communitarianism thrust upon citizens by New Labour rhetoric. Westheimer and

Kahn's warnings about where the logic of such depoliticised dutiful citizenship might lead are stark. Yet stronger forms of citizen action, such as: spontaneous general strikes, which are not manipulated by corrupt union officials; the occupation of government or educational spaces; mass walk-outs and sit-ins; civil disobedience such as extended mass non-payment of taxes; or as in France in response to poverty, unemployment and racist policy, the burning of cars and the smashing of property such as shops, are vilified, often refused the label of 'civic' even by liberals, and treated with huge and disproportionately authoritarian responses by so-called democratic states.

Civic engagement – at any cost?

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

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

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

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

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

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

This discussion too seems to turn on a strong presumption about national systems that are named 'democracies': namely the notion that all civic action and political mobilisation in a country that allows voting and calls itself a democracy is democratic. But this may not tally with everyone's experience of life even in a supposedly highly developed democratic country like the UK. Indeed, realising the amount of discontent with current manifestations of democratic government, whether just or unjust, numerous rightwing and sectarian organisations across the

globe are capitalising on young people's desire for an alternative. In the following section I examine an example of a wide-spread civic movement involving youth in India that takes as its fundamental premise a set of ideas that is deeply antithetical to democracy.

Acknowledging rightwing civic activism

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

On the ground, however, things are more complicated. The RSS run the equivalent of camps or training clubs for young 'volunteers'. They practice martial arts and listen to speeches and sermons about pure Indian blood, mind body and spirit and social work. They undertake local activities encouraging literacy for rural children and the rebuilding of defunct spaces to serve the 'community' – obviously a community delimited by religion and caste, but nevertheless covering a huge area and number of people. Not all of those who enter the RSS do so for 'uncivic' motives (Banerjee, 2003). Many insist that they are doing so to 'help their community' (defined as Indians or Hindus); and to help their motherland/nation – India. They have strict training programmes of physical fitness and exercise; and a strong regime of obedience and discipline. These youth do not get into trouble with their parents; and are often highly motivated at school and in community work. In every piece of literature about themselves and in discussion with members, the RSS describes itself as a civic and cultural and not a political organization.

Again it similarities with Westheimer and Kahne's responsible and dutiful citizen become apparent.

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

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

The producer of one youth civic website in London stated that for him civic or political actions were simply 'people trying to change the world to make it more like a place they wanted to live in'. In tune with this view, Christian fundamentalist youth in the US, young skin-heads in the UK and the far more diverse and powerful RSS youth in India believe in a highly stratified, racially or religiously purified world and take actions to bring about this society. Refusing to see some of the actions taken by RSS cadre as civic because one is repulsed by their ideological chauvinism and authoritarian philosophy as well as by other actions taken in support of this

ideology, makes it more difficult to understand why they have hundreds of thousands of young supporters or to explain their appeal in a specific place at a given historical moment. An inability to answer questions about the appeal of some organizations that involve youth in politics of whatever hue weakens rather than strengthens any case being made for democratic and civic action on the part of youth.

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

Conclusion: Learning from history and theory

The urge towards and the motivation for civic action can be traced in the contours of young people's life experiences, the ideologies they encounter and abide by, their social contexts, neighbourhoods and political encounters as well as their emotional commitments and loyalties be these race or religion, football, music, nation or local neighbourhood. Young people are not monolithic and they are certainly not utterly different from older adults; they are a category crosscut by ethnicity, gender, class, race and religion, as well as disability and sexuality. They have as many or few and as varied or as circumscribed opinions about their lives and their cultural circumstances as older adults. While this may seem a trite point, as Sanchez-Jankowski (2002) suggests it is surprisingly often ignored or side-stepped in calls for young people to become more civically and politically active. Studies of underprivileged ethnic minority youth's civic and political engagements in the United States (Sanchez-Jankowski 2002, Kishner,

Strobel and Fernandez, 2003) and in the UK (Al-Ghabban 2007; Noor, 2007) confirm that for some citizens in these democratic countries, civic engagement is predicated on complex and angry critique of the way in which their supposed representatives in the Senate or Parliament actually regard people like them. Additionally, these critiques can have different outcomes for different individuals and different groups, leading some to find solutions and take action on commonly perceived problems and leading others to do little or to participate in socially destructive actions.

Overwhelmingly in the global literature aimed at teaching young people and children civic values, there is an emphasis on conformity rather than on critique, confrontation or challenge; in the UK there is also an emphasis on speaking and writing in particular ways that abide by the rules and norms set by a ruling elite who show little willingness to alter policies just because citizens do not agree with them. While there is certainly a need to avoid crass populism in Government, what if anything is the point of participation that is never going to achieve anything? At some level, civic participation and engagement begin to look like instrumental justifications for citizenship of a particular country – somewhat like a licence fee – rather than signs of citizen's political agency, maturity or power. And the requirement to participate, when viewed in this light, again begins to look particularly unappealing from the point of view of young people.

I end by asking a series of questions that those of us interested in youth, citizenship and civic action would do well to consider. First, would we want to endorse politics *per se*, any politics, however rightwing or authoritarian or violent, as being better than no politics or apathy, mistrust, scepticism or cynicism? Indeed: Is reactionary civic involvement better than no involvement? Clearly some of the examples provided in this article would suggest that, at least in the author's view, the answer to both these questions is no.

Second, how is democracy strengthened by defining civic action as *de facto* benign, altruistic and democratic? If there is never just a single 'public' in any nation state for whom one can define a notion of 'the public good' and on whose behalf all civic actions are urged and taken, again, at least in my view there might be more danger in refusing to acknowledge that rightwing/authoritarian activism are civic than there is in accepting the term civic as being composed of a spectrum from authoritarian and reactionary to libertarian and democratic. The latter strategy is understandably more time-consuming at the outset as one cannot invoke a

notion of democratic participation and action merely by championing civic engagement. However, I believe that in the long run it will be beneficial both to young people, in that it will be evident that certain kinds of collective action and engagement are worse than mere introversion or individualism, and to those trying to foster democratic engagement, as the affective and cognitive pulls of authoritarian and sectarian civic action are better understood and countered.

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

Notes

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[i] Civicweb: Young people, the internet and civic participation, www.civicweb.eu, (2006-2009) is a project funded by the European Union and currently underway in seven European countries including the UK.

[i] Who's a young person? Is youth in a poor community in the UK and in India the same thing? Are twelve year olds the same as eighteen year olds and sixteen year olds the same as twenty-five year olds**?**

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