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Bright, Graham, Pugh, Carole and
Clarke, Matthew ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4693-248X
(2017) Youth work, agonistic democracy and transgressive
enjoyment in England. In: Pickard, Sarah and Bessant, Judith,
(eds.) Young People Re-Generating Politics in Times of Crises.
Palgrave studies in young people and politics . London, Palgrave
Macmillan, pp. 315-332

The version presented here may differ from the published version or version of record. If
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http://www.palgrave.com/gp/book/9783319582498

RaY

Research at the University of York St John

For more information please contact RaY at ray@yorksj.ac.uk

Youth work, agonistic democracy and transgressive enjoyment in England
Graham BRIGHT, Carole PUGH and Matthew CLARKE

Abstract

Concerns abound in media and political commentary regarding the purported political apathy of young people. This chapter shares the narratives of active engagement with politics on the part of a number of young people, as part of their efforts to resist the threats to youth services posed by the discourses and practices of neoliberal austerity. The analysis in the chapter links the young people's engagement to the tenets of agonistic models of democracy, namely pluralism, contestation and tragedy. The chapter concludes with consideration of the implications of participants' narrated experiences for the study of politics and political engagement in coming years.

Graham BRIGHT is Senior Lecturer in Childhood and Youth Studies and Youth and Community Work at York St John University, UK. His PhD with Durham University explores youth workers' life and practice narratives. Graham is editor of *Youth Work: Histories, Policy and Contexts* (Palgrave, 2015) and co-editor, with Carole Pugh, of *Youth Work: Global Futures* (Sense, forthcoming).

Carole PUGH is a lecturer in youth and community work at York St John University, UK, which she joined after 15 years of professional youth and community work practice. Her PhD with Huddersfield University explores the role of youth work in supporting young people's political participation.

Matthew CLARKE is Professor of Education at York St John University, UK. His research focuses on education policy and politics in the context of neoliberal globalisation with a particular focus on the implications of the latter for the work of teachers. His book *Teacher Education and the Political: The Power of Negative Thinking*, co-authored with Anne Phelan (UBC. Canada), was published by Routledge in 2017.

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Introduction
Debates regarding the supposed crises in young people's democratic and political participation have, as other authors in this book argue, been ubiquitous in recent years. Indeed, democracy, it would seem, is in crisis (della Porta, 2013), with widespread and growing scepticism regarding the political accountability of states, coupled with a deep distrust of democratic processes on the part of many of its citizens – developments that have been exacerbated by neoliberalism's hegemony and the resultant rise of the popular right in many global contexts.

While, in the United Kingdom (UK), concerns have been voiced about overall political participation, young people are said to be particularly disillusioned (Briggs, 2017) about traditional, conventional and electoral forms of political participation (see Pickard, 2017). At the last national general election in 2015, only 76% of 18-19 year olds were registered to vote, and of those, only 43% did so (Ipsos Mori, 2015, Electoral Commission, 2015). Young people's participation in the referendum on whether the UK should remain or leave the European Union in June 2016 contradicts this trend with an estimated turnout of 64% for 18-24 year olds (Bruter and Harrison, 2016), compared to 72.2% for all groups (Electoral Commission, 2016). However, 71% of those young people who did participate in the referendum voted to remain in the European Union (ibid), highlighting the effect of demographic change in undermining the "un-written rule" of democracy – that those whose lives will be affected longest have the greatest power at elections (Berry, 2014, p. 14).

Concerns about young people's presumed political apathy have led to research and government policy interventions (Youth Citizenship Commission, 2009), resulting in the introduction of 'Citizenship Studies' in the National Curriculum, the establishment of the UK Youth Parliament in 1999, and creation of the National Citizenship Service (NCS) in 2010. This emphasis on participatory citizenship is also reflected in policy discourses, examples of which include Positive for Youth (HM Government, 2011) and You're Welcome (DoH, 2011), which rhetoricise the importance of young people's voices.

However, these responses recycle increasingly narrow definitions of democracy (Pykett, 2007), which are more about compliance, than questioning the validity or desirability of the existing, or indeed any other, system. By individualising and responsibilising young people, policy makers ignore the realities of increasing disenfranchisement and marginalisation arising from the daunting array of discriminatory policies, including electoral reform that presents barriers for youth voter registration, age-based discrimination in housing rights and minimum wage entitlements, and, substantial increases in university tuition fees. Another is the large-scale closure of state-funded youth provision, which is the focus of this chapter. Taken together, these developments demonstrate a fundamental disregard for young people on the part of the government and corrode the substance of their democratic citizenship (Briggs, 2017; Jones, 2017).

Much youth service[1] provision is founded upon principles of democratic participation, association and collectivity (Batsleer, 2008; Jeffs and Smith, 1999; Ord, 2016), and while tensions exist between agendas of emancipation and control, a commitment to dissensual critical pedagogical praxis, grounded in contestation, critique

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[1] In England, the term youth services primarily refers to state sponsored provision of services for young people aged 13-19.

and critical action (see Freire, 1972), remains discernible (Taylor, 2008). Its current ambiguous status represents a neoliberal paradox: youth work[2] is required for its capacity to engage young people in 'project global capitalism', yet it is hated for the threat it poses of catalysing fraternity, solidarity, association and democratic collectivity amongst young people and their communities, thereby daring them to begin to think, act and resist differently. The research on which this chapter is based evidences youth work's ongoing capacity to ignite young people's critical imaginaries. In doing so, it moves beyond assumptive discourses of youth political apathy and disillusionment, to contend youth work's ability to capture and harness young people's frustration in engendering critical animation.

The chapter draws on the narrative accounts of five young adults[3] involved in national campaigns to save local youth services in England as part of wider anti-austerity movements, which responded to substantial and wide-ranging cuts introduced by the David Cameron-led Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government in the aftermath of the global economic crisis of 2007-2008. The chapter questions whether young people's supposed political disengagement arises from apathy, or represents a more considered rejection of neoliberal procedural democracy. We argue, that our participants' accounts reflect the characteristics of agonistic democracy, insofar as they embody a desire for the recognition of pluralistic voices; they value the disruptive and dissensual capacity of contestation, and implicitly acknowledge a tragic view of life, grounded in human finitude and fallibility, and, a recognition that choices and decisions always come at some cost. Agonistic democracy, we contend, has the capacity to serve as a source of transgressive enjoyment, and hence, to solicit democratic engagement, in a way that more banal, procedural versions of democracy, with their limited focus on regular "free and fair" elections, do not. We assert that youth services provide arenas where these democratic praxes are valued, and where the development of democratic capital can be facilitated. The chapter traces our participants' transgressive struggles with procedural democratic structures, in attempting to save local youth services, and concludes by arguing that the young adults in this study are passionately and politically engaged in promoting democratic accountability and renewal.

From procedural to agonistic democracy: Resisting neoliberalism
Popular and governmental discourses surrounding young people's political apathy presuppose a narrow reading of democracy, which privileges participation at the ballot box, parliamentary procedures and the rule of law, over, or even at the expense of, other forms of expression (Sloam, 2017; Pickard, 2017). This reading also ignores how democracy has become sutured with capitalism as 'democratic capitalism' (Dean, 2009), fuelling constructs regarding 'good' young neoliberal subjects, who diligently and compliantly perform their civic duty, without challenging, subverting or disrupting the advancement of capitalist logic (Kennelly, 2016).

Neoliberalism is, of course, a complex and contested term; but for the purposes of this chapter, we understand it as "*the disenchantment of politics by economics*" (Davies, 2014, p. 4, emphasis in original). Neoliberalism privileges the demands of capital over the welfare of people. Its rhetoric places individual 'freedom' over anything that

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[2] Youth work in England is a contested term, however, for the purposes of this chapter, we define it as informal education with young people.
[3] Participants in this study, as *young adults* (aged 22-27), retrospectively narrated accounts of their involvement in campaigns to save youth services, which they themselves accessed as *young people*, aged 13-25.

espouses collective democratic solidarity, and its production utilises the prospect of precarity to engender fear. It marginalises the weakest, and uses them to example the consequences of non-compliance.

Certainly, it can be argued that neoliberalism has come to use an entire generation of young people as disposable fodder by disproportionally targeting austerity measures against them, all in the name of 'good' fiscal order (Cairns et al., 2016). Whilst in the UK, this meant an overall reduction in public spending of 2.6% between 2009-2010 and 2014-2015, this disproportionally fell on 'non-protected services', with Youth Service funding reduced on average by a third up to 2014, and significant cuts continuing beyond that (Barton and Edgington, 2014; Nuffield Foundation, 2015). In a little over six years (2010-2017), some £387m has been cut from Youth Service budgets. Nationally, this resulted in the loss of some 600 youth centres, and more than 3,500 youth work jobs (Jones, 2016; Unison, 2016). The pursuit of neoliberal policy agendas has not only reduced the quantity of youth work, it has sought to induce fundamental changes in its character. The imposition of performative market rationality, increasingly prescriptive state agendas at the expense of broader educative principles, and the prioritisation of product over process has resulted in the 'hollowing-out' of practice (Jeffs, 2015, p. 85).

Neoliberalism moulds subjects in its own image (Scharff, 2016) and, in this sense, represents not just a fiscal, but an intellectual, form of discipline, which stultifies individual and collective imaginaries with its insistence that there is no alternative to the stratifying and competitive logics of the market (De Lissovoy, 2015). Neoliberalism thereby trains subjects into what Fisher (2009) describes as "capitalist realism": a world in which capitalism is the only reality with no conceivable alternatives – where "it appears as a neutral economic system that simply exists in the absence of any political intervention" (McGowan, 2016, p. 87). Democracy, in this capital realist view, is tamed and reduced to voting and the rule of law.

Yet, at its core, democracy has always been excessive – replete with radical and unsettling forces that challenge notions of balance and orderliness. For this reason, democracy was viewed by philosophers like Plato with deep suspicion, as something threatening to the rule of the wise elders. In psychoanalytic terms, this excess is associated with enjoyment, or jouissance – an intense form of pleasure/pain analogous with venturing beyond limits or constraints (McGowan, 2013). The current appeal of populist right wing parties can be understood in these terms, insofar as such a politics enables its adherents to derive enjoyment from the transgression of the limitations imposed by democracy, such as those established by 'political correctness'. The leaders of such parties achieve success by seeming to embody this jouissance. Meanwhile, capitalism's rise and its suturing with democracy has tamed the latter's excessive nature and limited its capacity to serve as a source of transgressive enjoyment. While capitalism purports to fulfil our desire through the endless accumulation of supposedly satisfying objects, support for democracy is left reliant on people's more limited capacity for identifying with the good (McGowan, 2013, 2016). However, the political disenchantment wrought by neoliberalism has rendered democracy increasingly vulnerable, and not to be taken for granted, thus repositioning it as a source of potential jouissance.

We believe the challenge for the youth work profession – and for young people – is to articulate alternative possibilities, which might serve as sources of transgressive enjoyment. In confronting this challenge, we highlight the scope offered by agonistic democratic models (Wenman, 2013), which privilege constituent power (the demos) over constituted power (structures of governance), and foreground the need to

recognise and value a plurality of voices, the positive value of contestation and dissensus, and the tragic nature of human existence. As such, agonistic democracy offers a counter-discourse to "the utterly discredited system of disciplinary neoliberalism" (Wenman, 2013, p. 297). Tellingly, it also resonates powerfully with the data generated with participants in this study.

Young people, pluralism and political engagement

For our participants, the effects of neoliberal austerity are not remote and abstract, but personal and keenly felt. These young people were deeply affected by proposed spending cuts to public services and, through democratic contestation, came to reject the depersonalisation of public services, in which the faces, names and voices of young people are replaced with budget lines and performance targets. In contesting the closures, they sought to highlight a plurality of voices and experiences, otherwise hidden by budgets and reductionist statistics. For the young participants, their deep personal involvement and political investment in youth services influenced their decision to become involved in campaigning to resist the closure of provision (Harris, 2015). As Pip explained:

> […] for me [the youth drop-in centre] has such a special place in my heart and if they had closed [it] I would feel like a part of me would have almost gone with it. Do you know what I mean? […] To have that taken away it was like I was being robbed too. Even though I don't work with them anymore and I don't go there for support or anything it felt like they were taking away a piece of my identity. Yes I think that's it, I think it felt like a piece of my identity would have gone alongside [The youth drop-in] too.

Jade concurred:

> And after all the cuts and things it was just the worst – it felt like someone had died. Because I had been seeing this person once or twice a week for years and then no more. I can't see them anymore. That was it. […]And instead of just being like I should do this because the cuts are bad or this is bad, it was very personal in the end. There would be times when I'd be crying about it and things like that and it got to the place where I wasn't able to talk about the cuts.

Youth services had supported young people in finding and connecting their voices, as well as in developing critical awareness regarding the processes by which some voices are amplified while others are silenced:

> At the time [young people] maybe don't even know they need that to be able to be that voice I suppose … if you're a young person dealing with housing, with exploitation, with family breakdown or mental health problems then they cloud your ability to have a voice. It would be very hard to be on the radio or practically organised enough to be in the right place at the right time if you're living in chaos (Lara).

In narrating their motivation for campaigning, participants explained how they embraced a pluralism, 'where everyone's voice is represented', that resonates with an agonistic view of democracy. In recounting their reasons for 'standing up', they articulated a complex range of emotions (rage, hope, fear, concern, optimism and passion), which suggest that for them, the democratic ideals associated with youth work were successful in offering a source for transgressive jouissance.

Democracy, contestation and capital

The Youth Citizenship Commission's (2009) findings that politicians and policy makers do not take young people's concerns seriously are reflected in the experiences of our participants, all of whom became involved in protests against cuts to services that they, their peers and their communities valued, but which were seen as unnecessary by local decision makers. This reflects a disconnection between the issues deemed important by young people and the priorities of politicians, as pointed out by Pip:

> The council in the local authority had made a decision because it was in their best interest and were going to see that through no matter what, or so they thought. And when we came up and said "no you're causing damage here, you're not causing positive things."

Even where young people previously engaged with organisations explicitly constructed by various levels and agencies of government to support young people's voices and participation, their experiences were of structures that were unresponsive to their ideas. As Christopher explained:

> As a member of the Youth Parliament, we'd talked about a lot of issues and did campaigns, but I think in that whole year term, I don't think there was anything tangible that we could say we'd done as the Youth Parliament.

Yet even as young people find that democratic structures do not reflect, or respond to their concerns, they continue to discover and generate alternative forms of engagement and contestation, including 'micro-politics' (Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley, 2004) and 'cause-orientated repertoires' (Norris, 2003). Rather than viewing young people as apathetic, we argue that dominant definitions of political participation, found for example in citizenship curricula, are premised on the fallible separation of public and private and fail to take account of the conception of politics as lived experience (Pykett, 2007). Youth services, responding to the challenge noted above of making democracy a living praxis, provide arenas for developing and enacting democratic contestation, and are instrumental in developing young people's voices as reflexive agents (Couldry, 2010), as illustrated by Pip's comments:

> For years I've tried to get people to understand where I'm coming from, I tried to get people to relate to what I was feeling and I feel like I was never really able to do it and you've [youth worker] just done it. It was so incredible. It was so empowering, it felt like you'd been silent for so long and all of a sudden to have a voice to be able to explain it. I will never forget it.

The process of young people collecting, telling, and representing their own and others' narratives was critical in contesting dominant neoliberal discourses, and central to the struggle to defend services. Established political structures had not taken these narratives into account; consequently, young people, youth workers and community members created informal networks, through, for instance, community meetings, media events and social media activity, to contest the status quo thereby becoming "self-actualising citizens" (Bennett, 2003, p. 6).

Despite recent undermining, the educative value of democratic association has been a defining feature of youth work since its inception (Smith, 2001). Kenny et al (2015) argue that citizenship grows through concrete educative practices, promoting reciprocally networked civic virtue in the form of social capital (Putman, 2000). For participants in this research, however, associative approaches not only had pedagogic

value, but were vital in identifying and drawing on wider support networks in contesting the closure of debates regarding the future of services.

For our respondents, participation in youth work programmes provided networked spaces, which linked individuals and agencies (including children's centres, community centres, police, universities, local newspapers, radio stations, as well as local political figures), enabling them to "come to voice" (Batsleer, 2008, p.5) and enact contestation. Without engagement with services, participants would not have been able to build social capital and develop capacity to speak effectively in defending provision. However, threats to services ignited democratic activism and served as a source of transgressive enjoyment in contesting dominant neoliberal narratives of efficiency and austerity.

Fighting for hope: democratic justice, symbolic resistance and tragic acceptance
Most campaigns began with a petition, a requirement in triggering access to local government meetings. At these meetings, participants delivered speeches and were subject to interrogation by elected officials. Participants' struggle for democratic legitimacy was characterised by a fight for dignity and hope – that alternative futures are possible, that young people matter, and should have a say in decisions that affect them. Participants narrate a struggle for recognition and justice that represents, and, in places subtly usurps the symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1977) mobilised by the elite against them. Pip describes the disdain she felt from an elected official who rudely asked: "why are 'these people' here?", whilst continuing to focus on his phone, as she and others brought their highly personal deputations, based on their experiences of the value of services. This violence is not always overt, but is epitomised by our respondents' experiences of power. They vividly describe being the subject of stereotypical views – incapable of having, or expressing an opinion about proposed cuts to their services. As Claire explained:

> Just because you're a young person and you wear a hoodie, it doesn't mean you don't have a valid opinion and I think it allowed a lot of people's opinions to be heard when they wouldn't normally be heard.

Christopher similarly argued that:

> More than anything, a lot of the councillors were just simply surprised that young people were so engaged with politics, and things that were going on.

Some participants spoke about the warmth and surprise with which some elected officials received their deputations, and others of a disdainful ambivalence. But, whilst 'democracy's' warmth is perhaps to be cautiously embraced, surprise suggests an imbalance of power. Specifically, surprise speaks to the disorientation of democratic representatives at young people's entry into a field which does not 'belong' to them, and of the structural disconnect between young people and elected representatives (Gordon, 2010). As Collin (2015 p. 110) argues "political cultures that [keep] young people at arm's length [present] a significant barrier to engagement" – an idea further reflected in Christopher's account:

> We went from our safe environment to their meetings, to where they were, and did things how they did them to try and save our services, our youth centre. […] We did that like 'cos we did it out of necessity 'cos it was the only way we could be heard. I don't think it was the best way to convey the young people's passion and feelings about it 'cos I don't think we articulated as much as we

would like to say because we were out of our depth, out of our environment. You know it's like being in someone else's house. You can't always express yourself like you would if you were in your house and they came to visit you. And I think the prospect of going to council meetings and offices was a very daunting prospect.

Young people are required, by formal participatory structures, to cross democracy's threshold, to learn its language, to know their place.

Seal and Harris (2016, p. 44) contend that whilst many accounts of state-fuelled symbolic violence against young people and communities "are partial, contradictory and reinscribe prevailing hegemonies, there is also potential for resistance and subversion." Participants' sabotage of this violence can be seen in the data. Young people recognise the damage done to them by narratives of 'risky youth'. However, in defending services, young people drew on these discourses. By utilising popular fears that reductions in services will result in 'anti-social behaviour', young people re-inscribe these narratives, using weapons that are fashioned against them in self-defence. This usurpation turns symbolic violence towards symbolic resistance.

Youth work can express symbolic resistance – it facilitates freely chosen associations with which to resist structural inequalities (ibid). Participants are therefore engaged in symbolic resistance to save significant associative spaces for themselves and others. Their counter-embrace of the hegemonic is a joyous and hard-won trickery; yet, it is costly, and may still return to wound them, and future generations (Bassil-Morozow, 2015). This trickery sits alongside the passionate and personally affective stories of the campaigns – of compellingly powerful narratives that speak sacrificially, in forgoing privacy and anonymity, of the transformative influence of youth services on young people's lives and communities. The victories these participants have won may be small-scale, and temporary, but they are significant for local communities nonetheless. As Seal and Harris (2016, p. 127) note, "small acts of resistance, even the symbolic ones should be celebrated". Thus, resistance's effectiveness is "that it produces a new reality, a new condition from which to resist" (Tuck and Yang, 2014, p. 13).

All participants, because they are so invested, both personally, and on behalf of their communities, describe a considerable weight of responsibility and guilt, and of fear and denial, beyond the known:

At points it did feel like "Are we actually going to make a difference? Is anything actually going to change? Is this going to have an effect? Are we just a little stone in a lake? What change are we going to make by being here?"... People didn't really talk about it, we tried to avoid it, what would happen if the youth centre wasn't here, what would be do instead? Those were questions we all had, but nobody really wanted to explore (Christopher).

These emotions are heightened by the alienating conditions of official democratic structures, and speak of an emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983), for which there is a cost, and no guaranteed return. As Kennelly (2016 p. 65) argues, young activists are "motivated by feelings of individual responsibility to the state and community (which turn quickly to feelings of guilt if one's perceived responsibility is not fulfilled), and ultimately curtails his or her behavior so as to not challenge the state beyond particular limits."

Each of our participants spoke forcefully about the expenditure and exchange of emotional labour, of their fight for hope, passionately recounting changing waves of emotion at different points of their respective campaigns. They recounted how encouragement from local communities, schools, businesses, media and professionals, together with a deep sense of personal and social injustice, spurred them on in their

fight. They described how they created and drew upon wells of solidarity, fraternity and shared values to sustain them and how varying engagements with procedural democracy's representatives deflated, encouraged, enraged and impassioned them in their struggle. Defending youth work and the democratic values it embodies, including commitments to pluralism and contestation, against the encroaching hegemony of neoliberalisation thus offers a source of transgressive jouissance/enjoyment – of vital energies, heightened and dissipated and heightened again. This defence is inflected within a tragic acceptance that there are no guarantees, which only makes the struggle all the more vital. As Fine, Tuck and Yang (2014, p. 50) posit: "Resistance is never pure, never simply oppositional or rejecting; it is often enacted with an affective bouillabaisse of anger, disappointment, sense of injustice, desire, yearning and ambivalence."

Conclusion: Passion, politics and protest as transgression.

Our participants may all vote in elections and for a range of motivations (duty, hope, despair, anger, guilt, conscience). However, they express mixed views regarding the "external efficacy" (de Moor, 2016) of official, procedural versions of democracy. They are nonetheless passionately political people who care deeply, and who are willing to act in response to a range of issues that are personally and socially significant (Harris, 2017; Harris, Wyn and Younes, 2010; Sloam, 2017). As Lara explained:

> Yes, definitely and I suppose those things I feel passionate about I'll lend my support by signing a petition or social media, like the NHS, junior doctors, academies, privatisation. The things that I care about.

This entails a need to be actively involved in political struggle:

> [...] government is a bit messed up and we have to do a lot to get our voices heard. Whether that is protesting or riots, I think that should be done. You have to be an activist, you can write your name down on a piece of paper and that will be a number, but you need to be really involved to make a difference. Signing and things do things, but I think just being aware and being more articulate with it and knowing where to go to get your voice heard (Jade).

This is a far cry from the picture of 'youth apathy' that dominates many media discussions. As Collin (2015, pp. 155-156) notes:

> [...]ordinary young people are identifying and acting on issues that matter, and in everyday ways they are shaping the kind of society they want to live in. [...] The remoteness with which they mainly view political institutions is in stark contrast with their often passionate commitments to particular issues and personally defined acts incorporated into their everyday lives.

Despite the implicit embodiment of agonistic politics suggested in our discussion, 'democracy', in its dominant liberal, procedural version, has given these young people perhaps just enough for appeasement, but has failed to truly win their hearts. They have learned critical (dis-)engagement. This research has focussed on 'winning' campaigns, at least to the extent that they achieved a measure of short-term success. However, there are many more young people with stories of loss to tell. If the winners remain cynical about 'democracy', questions must be raised regarding where this leaves those affected by the loss of their youth services.

Youth work represents a collaboration of critical voices. It offers relational and potentially democratic spaces in which dialogical learning based on young people's experiences of the world can be framed, critiqued and enacted. Yet by drawing on state

resources, working to its diffuse agendas and engaging democratic structures to contest governmental decisions, youth workers and young people continue to find themselves challenging, and sometimes uncomfortably involved in the legitimation of pernicious capitalist machinery. Nonetheless, the threat to, and removal of, youth work spaces further erodes young people's opportunities to engage in democratic practices (Harris, Wyn and Younes, 2010).

Globalisation, and the concomitant neoliberal atomisation of life, have arguably led to more fluid social ties, and resulted in more transitory, utilitarian associations (Bauman, 2009; Harris, 2017; Putnam, 2000). These changes may well coincide with generational shifts (Woodman and Bennett, 2015), in which the rising generation experience the painfully austere realities of collective civil precarity – the result of neoliberally-induced next-generation asset stripping. Consequently, they are moving beyond unattainable materialistic values, towards a new plurality that again (tentatively) embraces collective, post-materialist civic concerns (Inglehart, 1990, cited in Harris, 2017). The young adults in our study necessarily struggle within compromised democratic structures, which mean that in spite of victories in their campaigns, they still view contemporary 'democracy' as dislocated and damaged. As Harris (2017, p. 296) puts it: "[A] lack of interest in and engagement with formal politics and political institutions is not the same as a lack of interest in political issues or an ability to act politically".

Our participants have shown themselves to be passionately political in ways that makes sense given the situated fluidity of their lives. In particular, their accounts suggest they have embraced measures of pluralism, contestation and tragedy that resonate with an idea of agonistic democracy, while highlighting the shortcomings of the dominant contemporary procedural models of politics. In this sense, they can be viewed as one of Bang's (2005) 'everyday makers', those who "participate in short-term, concrete ways that fit in with their lifestyles; they value self-led participation; and, want to engage and disengage at will" (Collin, 2015, p. 99). Yet the democratic practices explored in this chapter, are both passionate and enduring – a result and a reflection of participants' deeply felt transgressive enjoyment. In considering their experiences, our participants, as young adults, express an on-going awareness of the continuing threat to the services they fought to save, and of a willingness, if needed, to fight again. This enduring passion speaks volumes about the significance of youth services, and the campaigns to save them, in fostering our participants' personal and civic identities. The personal it would seem for these young people *is* political, and the political, personal.

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