Tensions in Young People's Conceptualisation and Practice of Politics

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Abstract

Young people have been characterised as apathetic and disengaged from mainstream politics. This discourse draws upon a narrow, regulatory and hegemonic model of politics that centres on parliamentary politics. This paper reports findings from a qualitative study of young people drawn from across the political spectrum that also found most participants to adhere to this dominant model of politics. However, this conceptualisation of politics did not match their forms of socio-political engagement, instead it generated a series of tensions and worked to discount their actions as not 'genuine' or 'real' politics. It is argued that this narrow, regulatory model of politics does not reflect contemporary social conditions and actually militates against young people understanding themselves as political actors and beings.

Keywords: Activism, Feminism, Politics, Young People

Introduction

1.1 Academics, journalists and governments alike point to low youth voter turnout rates as symptomatic of a generation of young people who maintain little engagement with politics and show few signs of re-connecting. In the United Kingdom (UK) for the general election held in May 2005, the turnout rate for those aged 18 – 24 years was 37 per cent, down 2 per cent from the previous election in 2001. More than half those aged between 25 and 34 years did not vote in the former or the latter election, with voter turnout rates at 49 per cent for 2005, up 3 percent from 2001 (MORI 2005). Similarly, in the United States (US) elections of 2004, 42 per cent of young people turned out to vote, while in 2008 the proportion rose to just under half when 48.8 per cent of 18-24 year olds reported voting (US Census Bureau 2005, 2009). Furthermore, the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) has identified a similar pattern for Western and Northern Europe (1999, see also Johnson and Marshall, 2004: 7-9).

1.2 Not surprisingly, the notion of youth apathy and disengagement has gained a good deal of currency, particularly in light of the empirical weight of the statistics cited above. Concern about young people's apparent apathy and disengagement from politics can be seen in the academy (Bhavnani 1991; Mellor 1998; Mellor et al. 2002; Vromen 1995; 2003), the media (Coultan 2004; Jennings 2001; Sluggett 2006), and governments (Eckeresley 1988; Edwards et al. 2006; Electoral Commission 2002; Jeffery 2005; POWER Inquiry 2006; Print et al. 2004, 2005; Saha et al. 2007; SSCEET 1989).

1.3 This paper will begin by canvassing some of the recent research which underpins the discourse of youth apathy and disengagement. The following section will argue that the discourse of youth apathy assumes a narrow, regulatory, and hegemonic definition of politics. The second half of the paper will discuss the present study's findings which show that while most participants hold to the dominant conceptualisation of politics, this does not reflect the variety of ways in which they practice politics. Instead, these young people appear as reluctant feminists or activists and discount their actions as not 'genuine' or 'real' politics thus creating a series of tensions for young people in their political dispositions.

Young People as Apathetic and Disengaged – a Dominant Paradigm

2.1 More than a decade of social research has found young people's political knowledge, interest, and participation lacking (Bulbeck and Harris 2007; Lean 1996; Mellor 1998; Mellor et al. 2002; Vromen 1995). Research in Australia highlights young people's lack of trust in politicians and general cynicism for the political process (Mackay, 1993; Print, et al. 2004). Research from the UK broadly reflect these trends, with studies showing a decrease in political knowledge, interest, trust and party identification amongst

younger age groups (Park 1998; Jowell and Park 1998; Park et al. 2004; Wilkinson and Mulgan 1995). The following comments from Pirie and Worcester (2000: 35) characterise the findings of this body of research:

> Today's young people say they are not interested in politics and do not regard political activity as worthwhile. They know little about the institutions of government at various levels, and feel little loyalty to the communities of which they are a part. They reject community activism, and do not participate. They regard citizenship only as a way of behaving, and of having regard for others.

This interpretation of young people as apathetic and disengaged from politics can also be found within work on youth participation. In a recent review of youth participation policy, Edwards (2007: 543) notes 'the literature assumes from the outset that most young people are apathetic, civically unaware, disassociated and excluded.'

2.2 The discourse of youth apathy typically draws upon quantitative methodologies and orthodox hegemonic notions of politics. This approach has been described by Henn et al. (2002: 170) as 'conventional political science' and by O'Toole et al. (2003: 46) as 'mainstream survey-based literature'. Questionnaires typically ask respondents about signing petitions, joining a political party, or writing to a politician (for example see, Bean 1989; McAllister 1998; White et al. 2000). It is a conceptualisation that privileges institutionalised politics and holds the activities of political parties and electoral politics at its core. It represents the conventional wisdom and dominant paradigm for understanding young people and their relationship with politics. Hence, this work draws on a particular model of politics to measure young people's political knowledge and participation. I have argued elsewhere (Manning 2009) that this model of politics has its origins in the Scottish Enlightenment and was developed in response to very particular social circumstances, in particular, the decline of alternative models of politics (civic republicanism) increasing mercantilism and social distance.

2.3 While the authors do not name it, there can be little doubt that the discourse of youth apathy holds the institutions of this narrow, regulatory model of politics as its focus, as 'real politics'. If young people lack knowledge and interest in electoral politics, then they are deemed to be lacking knowledge and interest in politics. Political practices undertaken by young people which blend public and private are typically missed by research operating with a notion of politics that maintains a decisive split between public and private spheres. Precisely because the Scottish Enlightenment model of an administrative, regulatory, demoralised politics is hegemonic, unreflexive deployment of politics in research effectively squeezes out any form of 'politics' that falls beyond its bounds. It is important to note that these kinds of approaches to participation make little concession to young people as active social beings, negotiating complex social contexts and perhaps fostering new or different ways of doing politics. Such research reifies the assumptions of a model of politics developed some two hundred and fifty years ago. This is of concern due to the problems of measurement (discussed below) and labelling of young people as apathetic and disengaged. Equally important is the model's inability to respond to the tremendous social change which has taken place since its development and concurrent changes in political practice which flow from such social change. These changes include the challenge to public/private divide in liberal democratic politics mounted by new social movements (see Seidman 2008). Not surprisingly, there is a growing body of research which counters this depiction of young people's relationship with politics by opening up the meaning of politics and political engagement.

2.4 As early as 1991, Bhavnani's work was drawing attention to the critical semantic difference between the terms apathetic and cynical. Unlike other researchers who use the words interchangeably, and hence, conflate their meaning, Bhavnani argued that cynicism requires a level of political analysis and critique and thus, a modicum of engagement, even if the individual decides to take no further part in orthodox participation. This means choosing to be disengaged can be a political act, and further, that cynicism 'may even act as an *impetus* for political activity.' (Bhavnani, 1991: 13, emphasis in original) In Australia, Harris (1999, 2001, 2003, 2004) has built on Bhavnani's analysis of apathy and cynicism in a series of articles detailing her research with young women engaged in the trans-national culture of producing 'zines'. 'Zine', derived from fanzine and magazine, are self-published works which may be web or print-based and emerged out of punk and anarchist scenes (see Harris 2003; and Marcus 2010). Harris says some of the young women in her research:

> … poiticise apathy and cynicism as active resistance to a postindustrial state unworthy of their engagement. … In other words, they do not want to be included in a system they find structurally problematic but would rather change this structure. (2001: 194-5)

2.5 Clearly, the young women involved in Harris's research, regardless of how they would score on an orthodox scale of participation, are highly engaged in the social and political world around them, as evidenced by their powerful criticisms and their questioning of the way society is currently structured. In calling into question the way things work and asking how they might be different or better, these young women are doing politics or what Eliasoph has called public-spirited conversations (1998).

2.6 Young people are 'political' in a variety of ways, as other research has shown. Using quantitative methods, Vromen's (2003) research used a set of participatory acts broader than those used in 'conventional political science' and found 93 per cent of her broadly representative sample of young Australians had involvement with or membership of a group of some kind. Recent international research on political consumerism has also called for a broadening of the notion of political participation (Stolle et al. 2005).

2.7 Research on young people and politics must engage with young people's broader conceptions of the political. Harris's research has worked to broaden out notions of politics. She argues that the DIY (do it yourself) production of zines connected with the grrrl zine culture are largely a means of winning space for

young women to: express feminist politics and pursue and create discussion about its political objectives (1999); to challenge dominant narratives about youth citizenship 'in a project of redefining and reclaiming politics and citizenship' (2001: 183, see also Harris, 2004; Bulbeck and Harris, 2007); and to challenge, deconstruct and parody contemporary notions of girlhood which typically centre around notions of 'girlpower' and girls as risk-takers (2003). In the UK, following the lead of Henn et al. (2002), O'Toole and her colleagues (2003; O'Toole et al. 2003) used a range of qualitative approaches to explore how young people understand politics, in contrast to quantitative techniques which typically impose a conception of the political from the outset. In Australia, Manning and Ryan (2004) – also following the lead of Henn et al. – have clearly shown that adult researcher and younger participants may not share understandings of fundamental terms like citizenship. Hence, researcher and researched may talk past one another, maintaining different meanings for the same concept without the space to acknowledge or discuss those differences.

2.8 This counter to the discourse of youth apathy has also raised important methodological concerns about the study of young people and politics. Orthodox quantitative approaches to measuring young people's socio-political participation are unable to measure the depth or complexity of the participation they identify, nor any level of active, critical or sceptical disengagement (Bhavnani, 1991; Henn et al. 2002; Harris, 2001). In other words, this means problematising the assumption that signing a petition whilst shopping or online is somehow more engaged or legitimate than deciding not to vote after deep consideration of the problems of the system of government or the electoral process. It seems fair to suggest that this is a task largely beyond mainstream quantitative approaches to the study of young people and politics. In contrast, qualitative research is capable of exploring active resistance and complexity in young people's understanding and (lack of) practice of politics.

The Study

3.1 The present study is one of a very small number which aim to understand how young people conceive of and practice politics. A full account of the research method appears elsewhere (Manning 2009). Ethical approval for the project was granted by the author's home university. Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used to compose a sample of 18 young people aged 18–30 years with engagement across the political spectrum including: party politics; activism and activist groups; volunteer work; and 5 young people not involved in any institutionalised form of social/political participation. The sample contained ten women and eight men and included some ethnic diversity with two Indigenous Australian participants and one of Italian descent. With regard to socio-economic status, all but two participants had been to university, however participants' parents held jobs across the labour market – for example, small business owners, professionals, farmers and semi-skilled workers. Interviews were conducted in the first half of 2004 and were audio recorded, transcribed by the author and subjected to thematic analysis. While the sample is clearly not representative, it is well suited to provide insights into the ways in which young people from across the political spectrum – including those not involved with formal socio-political participation – understand and practice politics. And while the research was conducted in Australia the findings should be broadly reflective of other established democracies given the vast socio-economic, cultural and political overlap of many of these societies.

3.2 Previous studies in this area have highlighted the utility of qualitative methods in the research of young people and politics (Henn et al. 2002; Manning and Ryan 2004; O'Toole 2003; O'Toole et al. 2003). In-depth qualitative interviews were used to allow participants the space to explore how they understood politics and the ways in which they engaged with it. Clearly, as an interviewer I brought particular ideas about what politics is into the interview. However, unlike traditional survey techniques, this did not result in measuring participants' understanding and practice against a predefined notion of politics. During the course of the interview participants were able to explain in their own words how they understood politics and the kinds of political participation they were and were not involved with.

3.3 In what follows, participants from the study will illustrate the ways in which the pervasiveness of the hegemonic definition of politics generates a series of tensions within participants' understanding and practice of politics and, furthermore, how this model of politics and its hegemonic status works to close down political interpretations of their actions and themselves.

Reluctant Feminists

4.1 During the interview stage it was striking to note just how reluctant young women were to label themselves feminist, how uncomfortable they were with the term, and that even those who embraced a feminist label felt the need to clarify what they meant by feminism and what kind of feminist they were. The following excerpt from Heidi clearly shows her reluctance and unease about feminism.

> Interviewer: Given that you've just mentioned a feminist rapper would you say that you're a feminist?
> Heidi: Yeah, see I wouldn't say that I was but I guess some people would say that I am. I guess it depends on what you define as feminism […] like I don't think that feminism has to be synonymous with um, with women trying to be men. I think men and women should be equal, but I think people should realise the fact that men and women are different and, you know, that men and women were created to enhance those differences between each other and to play off of them. But, yeah I guess in some ways I am, but I'm uncomfortable with the term, I don't like it.
> Interviewer: What makes you uncomfortable with it?
> Heidi: I guess because a lot of, a lot of feminists you know, do, do see, do see that feminism should be becoming like a man and I don't think that it should um, and yeah, that men have no part to play within, within feminism, yeah. I just find it uncomfortable.

4.2 Numerous participants asked about feminism chose to draw this distinction between equality and sameness; there is a real concern that feminism is perceived as working to make men and women the same:

> … if you're talking about women having equal respect and equal resources and equal possibilities […] I fully support that and I think that hasn't really totally happened, and that's important. If you're saying that women are the same as men […] I think that's bullshit […] we're different beings. (Monica, 30 years)

4.3 Mary (20 years) does call herself a feminist, but she too feels a need to qualify what sort of feminist she is:

> Interviewer: Would you describe yourself as a feminist?
> Mary: Yeah, yep, absolutely. Um, I'm not like a crazy feminist [laughs]
> Interviewer: [laughs] A mad feminist.
> Mary: A mad-man-hater-feminist. But I do think that, that the differences in inequality between men and women are still significant, you know. Like 'cos yeah, men, men still are in the positions of power, they're still in the highest paying jobs, so yeah in that way I think there's huge differences, and yeah, women's interests are still not really that represented, there's still inequality so, I am a feminist in that respect I guess.

4.4 While Gillian (22 years) is involved with a women only peace group, she does not identify as a feminist, nor does she interpret her participation in women only protests as feminist. In her words:

> Interviewer: Given that you're involved with [name of group] […] um, would you describe yourself as a feminist?
> Gillian: No.
> Interviewer: No? Can you talk a bit about that?
> Gillian: Um, I just see other issues as more important than that in our country at this time, you know. I guess personally because I've – that sounds a bit terrible: personally because you know, I've never been discriminated against because I'm a woman, I don't care [laughing at herself], yeah. No, I think it's, it's more of an issue in other countries but; yeah, I just don't, from my point of view I don't think it's all that constructive just to look at women, wherein there's usually, in the countries where women are worse off it's usually for a reason and sort of broader problems, so.

4.5 It is also interesting to look at the way she interprets her involvement with a regular women only silent vigil:

> Yeah so I was just involved with [name of women's peace group] basically because I agree with you know, a lot of their aims […] well it started with going to the [name of women's silent vigil group] things which was just a no war thing it wasn't, like it was just against war it wasn't anything particularly feminist except for it was just women that were allowed to protest.

4.6 What is important about this example is precisely that Gillian interprets the group and her involvement with it in particular ways and not others. It seems clear that there are many ways in which a women-only silent vigil against war and violence could be interpreted as a feminist act. One suspects that for women of a previous generation a feminist interpretation of the act might be the dominant one (Roseneil 1995). Yet for Gillian, the fact that she is a woman taking part in a vigil with other women protesting against war is irrelevant; it is Gillian's protest as a person who can protest, and remember, that counts for her.

4.7 Gillian's interpretation of the vigil and her involvement highlights the polysemic nature of politics, in that it is interpreted and practiced by young people in many and varied ways. Gillian prioritises the vigil or protest against war and violence, while others may highlight the gender dimensions of the act, others still could hold forth the protest itself as an act that makes one more than simply a consumer, and so on. The point is that these acts are interpreted by social actors and the meaning of such acts is not fixed or monolithic. It allows for creativity on social action and hence provides scope for new and different forms of politics to be practiced.

4.8 For participants like Monica (30 years) and Hannah, feminism is understood as textual knowledge belonging to a specific time, a knowledge and academic discipline one must fully understand to legitimately claim a feminist identity. Monica says:

> Ummm, you know I haven't spent that much time thinking about feminism, I wonder whether its that relevant to people my age group or younger um, 'cos I don't remember feminism; I don't remember the 70's or whenever it was that it happened, you know. I didn't read the books and stuff that – so I sort of don't really know that much, details of what it was about.

4.9 Hannah makes similar comments:

> Um just like one of my friends she's pretty heavily involved in it and she um, she like, she's read every feminist text there is on earth and knows all about it and stuff, and I'm like, I feel really dumb when she's talking about all that stuff 'cos I don't really get it [laughs] and like I should probably learn about this. And from the bits I know it makes sense so…

> Interviewer: Um, um, would you call yourself a feminist?
> Hannah: […] I don't feel that I can just because I don't know enough about it and I feel a bit

stupid if I walk around and call myself a feminist when I haven't even read like whatever the major feminist texts are…

4.10 Here we see feminism depicted more as a discipline than in the dominant second wave definition of feminism as grounded in embodied knowledge and experience, where all women can be feminists because of their experiences of subordination by men (Holmes 2009). What is particularly striking about Monica and Hannah's interpretations of feminism is the apparent contradiction with their actual engagements with feminism. Both women are involved with women's groups and organizations and talk about women's/feminist issues. Indeed, Monica describes Naomi Wolfe's *Beauty Myth* (1990) as "my bible".

4.11 All participants asked about feminism, whether they embraced a feminist identity or not, felt the need to qualify what they meant by feminism and what sort of feminist they were. Most participants were reluctant to accept a feminist label and remain uncomfortable with the term. It is striking that while many young women are ambivalent about feminism (Skeggs, 1997; Wilkinson and Mulgan, 1995, p. 89, 92), most of the young women cited above (Heidi, Hannah, Gillian, and Monica) are actively involved with activities that can be described as feminist, and yet they remain ambivalent and eschew a feminist identity. From the comments made by participants above it seems reasonable to suggest that much of the reluctance they display over being labelled a feminist stems from the persistent and powerful stereotype of feminists as 'man hating, lesbian, boiler-suited, fat and ugly' (Bulbeck 2001, see also Bulbeck 2009; Campo 2009). As such, these young women can be understood as negotiating an anti-feminist social context by distancing themselves from the highly negative dominant conception of feminism which works to close down the option of a feminist identity – or even engaging in a set of 'feminist' practices. It is also important to note that feminism is typically defined as beyond the bounds of 'real' politics (Squires 2004).

Reluctant Activists

5.1 Unlike their ambivalence about feminism, participants' reluctance at accepting an activist identity often reflected their understanding of politics as constituted by a public/private divide. An activist identity was regularly understood as denoting someone who was particularly politically (publicly) active beyond the bounds of mainstream politics, resulting in numerous participants thinking they were not *active enough* to qualify as activists. Beyond this, other participants constructed a divide between their (political) interests and 'real' politics.

5.2 It is interesting to think about what counts as activism in Heidi's view. Heidi was involved with an indigenous youth group but said she would not describe herself as an activist because she did not take action often enough – many other participants made similar comments (John, Hannah, Rebecca, Gillian, Philip, Mary, Daniel). Her understanding of activism highlights mobilisation, protest, and political action in the public sphere. Heidi thinks the group she is a part of could become a means of mobilising protest, but she contrasts her group with an activist organisation she visited in San Francisco: "… they can mobilise you know, 2000 young people to go and do something, you know … that's what I'm talking about, like that's activism." In effect, Heidi is drawing a distinction between the sort of work that goes into building the infrastructure that makes such mobilisation possible, and the mobilisation itself. Activism is confined to the actual act of mobilising people – putting on a protest – rendering the sort of institution and infrastructure building she does with her group as outside of activism proper. This division of labour seems analogous to a backstage/front stage divide, where only work which will actually be seen in the public sphere, at a protest, counts as activism – the planning, meetings, discussions, thinking and research that go to putting on such an event are excluded (Holmes 2009).

5.3 Similarly, Hannah was asked if she would describe herself as an activist:

> Um, I guess lately I would because I have been involved in lots of like activism, but um yeah I guess I'd like to think of myself as one, but that um, that I have been contributing to some kind of, to activism on [university] campus at least, so yeah I think I would, in a kind of loose… (emphasis in original)

5.4 The reluctance is obvious in this excerpt; even at the end she will not claim the activist label. It is as though she is not legitimately entitled to call herself one, like she has not completed some imaginary quota of activism hours to qualify. It is also important to note the palpable link between activism the action and an activist identity; the more activism she undertakes the more legitimately she can claim an activist identity.

5.5 If we accept Heidi and Hannah's definition of activism, then activism only counts when it is done in the public sphere, conforming to established practices like rallies or other forms of public protest. Paul Lichterman has also found a focus upon 'doing' as constituting 'real' politics or activism (1999: 119-20). This means remaining captive to liberalism's rules and logic of defining what counts as politics, where there is a clear divide between public-political and private-non-political. When activism is equated with taking public, political action, unless that action itself questions the public-political/private-non-political divide, politicisation of the self and the new opportunities for political action within 'private' life it reveals, are systematically denied.

5.6 Following Heidi and Hannah's conflation of activism with taking public, political action, acquiring the label of 'activist' is an almost bureaucratic process of undertaking certain actions, like organising a rally. If one ceases to take part in such activities, it follows that in turn one is no longer entitled to the label of activist. This definition of activism stands in contrast to those which see activism as an identity and mindset rather than a repertoire of practices (King 2006).

'Real' politics versus my 'political' interests

6.1 Connected with participants' shunning of an activist identity are those participants who understand politics in such a way as to set up a schism between 'real' politics and their own interests – which are potentially political, but only sometimes defined as such. Gillian and Monica largely understand their involvement with, among other things, peace and women's groups as non-political because it does not relate to mainstream, hegemonic politics.

6.2 Gillian has been involved in organising very large anti-Iraq-war protests, in total mobilising over one hundred thousand people to protest. When asked if she thought the actions of her anti-war group were political, she answers no:

> I don't think it is to further the aims of any particular political party or even a, really a political cause, because pacifism isn't political in its essence. … Well it was about, but it was about you know, saving the lives of innocent people and that had nothing to do with politics.

6.3 As she rightly points out, it could be political; it depends upon one's definition of the political. What is salient here is that Gillian does not see her involvement and protest against war as political. She betrays her narrow and orthodox understanding of politics; because the rallies were not to further a particular political party, or in her mind a political ideology, they were not political. One of the most intriguing things about the way Monica understands politics is that she, like Gillian, does not consider herself a political person. Monica sees herself as concerned with humanitarianism and environmentalism through, for example, various activist groups, her vegetarianism and political consumerism. Both women also share the notion that these concerns are not, as Monica would say, part of 'capital P'[1] politics. While Gillian has a narrower understanding of politics, which means she does not define herself as political, Monica feels that she knows little about 'capital P' politics and thus is "not a political person".

> Like you talked about [me] being politicised at an early age and stuff, but the interesting thing about it is I wouldn't see it that way. Um, and I was, I always describe myself as not being a political person and I would even now, and that's probably quite bizarre because I've just sat here and given you a whole range of strong political views …

6.4 Monica explains this perplexing self-definition as the result of her family not talking about 'capital P' politics:

> Interviewer: …um, did you grow up in a family where like 'capital P' politics was spoken about?
> Monica: No never ever! I'm, that's probably why I don't see myself as political and I say I'm not a political person and 'cos I don't really understand it on a you know, I'm not well informed on a 'capital P' theoretical kind of level; you know, we never ever discussed politics with a 'capital P' in our house, it was just never talked about. Um, I envy those people who had interesting kind of fascinating philosophical discussions as kids because we didn't, but we just talked about justice and like stuff you'd see on TV and is that fair and why is it happening, and power, where's power coming from, who's involved, what's their agenda? So that's, but that's all kind of small p politics.

As a result, Monica's political practice and interests are measured against a political yardstick she has little to do with, and not surprisingly she falls beyond its bounds.

6.5 Indi (22 years) maintains a similar split between her involvement with sex work politics and mainstream hegemonic politics. Indi has been involved in advocacy, representation, and lobbying within the sex industry. And while she also employs her self and lifestyle to challenge dominant discourses about sex work, women and sex, she says that she is "not a very political person". Indi separates out her political knowledge and practice relating to sex work from a broader political sphere, rendering her 'un-political':

> … as I said, I'm not a very political person. I'm not educated enough in it, so I don't feel very confident talking about politics – I just think it's a whole lot of people getting the world wrong, basically.

> I'm not really educated about politics.

> Indi: I wouldn't like to do anything political … Yeah, political stuff, don't wanna do that.
> Interviewer: Don't wanna do that. Why wouldn't you want to do that?
> Indi: Because I don't understand the political table [laughs]. Nah, I don't understand it very well …

> My focus is more on the sex worker stuff.

6.6 Indi understands politics as "a whole lot of … ugly fat blokes with glasses crapping on … getting the world wrong basically." This political sphere is the world of parliaments and elections, taxes, inflation, and unemployment. With this understanding of what counts as politics, Indi's potentially political knowledge and practice relating to sex work is defined as beyond and separate from politics.

Tensions of Liberalism

7.1 It is most noteworthy that even for those participants who adhere very closely to classical liberalism (Paul and Peter), tensions are inescapable. The tensions within Paul's political practice are to be elaborated in a future paper[2] while the discussion below focuses on Peter.

7.2 Peter's practice and understanding of politics has been outlined elsewhere (Manning 2009), but he

describes himself as a conservative liberal and adheres to the hegemonic notion of politics discussed above with its separation of public and private. The tension found in Peter's political disposition is not something he is necessarily aware of. Peter himself undermines the liberal divide between public and private and implicates his 'private' life in 'politics' through his concerns about and avoidance of mass-produced animal products, additives, food supplements, and genetically modified crops. Peter's family only eat free-range chicken and eggs, and when discussing these concerns he says, "I just think there's a big unknown…for example chickens: mass produced, hormone stuffed, can't be natural, can't be good."

7.3 Peter couches his concerns about mass-produced foods and genetically modified crops within a health context. He does not make any links between his own avoidance of these products and the potential to affect the practices of the food industry, nor does he describe these practices as boycotts. Hence, while it would be inaccurate to describe Peter's avoidance of battery farmed chickens or genetically modified foods as political action, or evidence that his self can be the locus of politics, it does indicate that even Peter's depoliticised 'private' life is not impervious to politics. His liberalism, however, largely renders these practices matters of personal choice for the health conscious. Here we see classical liberalism unable to accommodate a fluid boundary between private and public, unable to link the private sphere with a politically pregnant language, latent with the political opportunities of 'private' practices. Regardless of Peter's inclination toward politicising his 'private' life, this example shows how his orthodox understanding of politics saps the political potential out of his private life. This kind of liberalism cannot provide for the sorts of private-political opportunities opening up in late modernity (Sheller and Urry, 2003).

7.4 While Peter's liberal, hegemonic notion of politics remains largely intact, what is salient is that Peter's liberalism is unable to furnish him with a language which could realise the political potentials lurking in his private practices and everyday life. Even someone like Peter, whose private/public divide appears solid, is unable to prevent political opportunities from seeping into his private life. Of course, while he cannot avoid this in late modernity, he does still have a choice to pursue such opportunities or leave them dormant. Unfortunately, unless Peter is willing to significantly muddy the waters of his liberalism, the choice to politicise his self and private life remains hidden. It is ironic that a political doctrine which places so much importance on the freedom of the individual to choose should be concealing a significant political choice, that of politicising one's self and everyday life.

Concluding Remarks

8.1 Clearly, the regulatory, liberal model of politics with its public/private divide and the force of its hegemonic status is working to close down the scope for young people to understand themselves and their actions as political. This is not to say that mainstream politics and orthodox participation are irrelevant, far from it. It is to argue however, that if we are to engage young people in politics and foster their sense of political agency, notions of politics *must* reflect the circumstances of contemporary social life and in part this means acknowledging the opportunities for politics in private: planning, meetings, discussion and thinking, as well as political consumerism, recycling, cynical disengagement and so on. Young people are *already* engaged in these activities, whether they or others define them as political or not, and the alternative – turning a blind-eye – means being complicit with a notion of politics which discounts many contemporary forms of political engagement as beyond the bounds of 'real' politics and works to depoliticise and disempower young people.

8.2 This does not mean everything is political; for if we augment the political to include anything and everything we risk diluting this special realm. However, it does mean that anything could *become* political as parts of social life are pushed between the realm of necessity and the natural and the realm of deliberation and the malleable. This recalls the enduring second-wave feminist theme, 'the personal is political'. It is important to remember that this was a call to action, highlighting the work required to *make* various 'personal' matters – domestic violence, equal pay, access to abortion – political issues. Similarly, for many of the young people described above there is conceptual work to be done in challenging dominant notions of politics if they are to reinterpret themselves and their actions as political/feminist/activist. When this work is not undertaken young people's political potential is curtailed and the opportunities for politics within 'private' life provided by late modernity remain hidden.

8.3 Reconceptualising politics *is* a challenge to power, but that challenge is not simply abstract – it is part of many people's, and not just self-described activists', everyday lives. Large numbers of people now operate beyond the bounds of mainstream politics to affect political change, as evidenced by numerous examples like the success of fair trade initiatives or the Make Poverty History campaign. While the reconceptualisation may be lagging behind the practice if we can begin to speak of these activities as part of politics we can augment the political sphere.

8.4 Part of this process requires future research to be reflexive in its use of the term politics and attuned to the ways in which the dominant liberal model of politics works to close down what counts as political. Researchers need also be aware of political repertoires operating outside mainstream politics. Quantitative methods will continue to be important, but should draw upon the rich qualitative work in this area to inform the design of survey instruments. Mixed methods research also has much to offer a field such as this where the macro and the micro view need to be in dialogue. The study of the political demands we remain open to the changing nature of politics, the variety of interests ('public'/'private') which can be represented, and the range of sites in which this struggle can take place – 'public', 'private' and in between. As researchers we need to understand politics as a dynamic field and be open to the new and the unexpected.

8.5 One relatively easy means of fostering the conversation to augment our understanding of politics would be to teach these ideas in existing school-based civics education programmes. If a more inclusive model of politics were used in these programmes not only would students learn about mainstream politics and orthodox forms of participation, but they could also be enticed by a repertoire of political actions that can be practiced with their friends and families as part of everyday life.

Acknowledgements

Notes

[1] Monica used 'capital P' politics to denote mainstream politics.

[2] For Paul the tensions are to be found between his sense of self as relationally constituted and the way his political views are constitutive of his self on the one hand, and the notion of self which accompanies his liberalism on the other. Hence these tensions are less about public/private divides and more about notions of politics and self to be elaborated in a future paper dealing with relational models of self.

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