

‘Young People and Environmental Activism: The Transformation of Democratic Politics’

Special Issue of the Journal of Youth Studies

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Introduction

This special issue of the *Journal of Youth Studies* concerns ‘Young People and Environmental Activism: The Transformation of Democratic Politics’. It is comprised of articles that were prepared by the contributing authors to coincide with the 2021 United Nations Climate Change Conference (UNCCC), COP26, which took place in Glasgow, Scotland, at the end of October and early November 2021. For the United Nations, the aim of COP26 was to “*accelerate the measures towards the goals of the Paris Agreement and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change*” (UNFCCC, 2021). Many marches, rallies and protest events were held during the two-week - heavily policed - conference. A large Fridays for Future (FFF) demonstration went by the location of the COP21 negotiations and ended with a rally in the city centre. There, Heidi, 24, a young climate and environmental activist, who had travelled from London to Glasgow, held a self-made placard declaring “REDUCE, RISE, REVOLT. END CLIMATE COLONIALISM”. When interviewed by one of the authors of this article,¹ Heidi commented: “*There needs to be drastic change. It is going to take a lot more than just governments just getting together and talking. People are going to have to stand up and do something.*” This quote encapsulates contemporary youth climate and environmental activism, which is directed towards the political establishment, using non-electoral forms of political mobilisation. Angry and organised, young environmental activists are vigorously condemning governmental greenwashing and are calling for substantial change.

Young environmental activists for change

The climate strikes that took place across the world in 2018 and 2019 confirmed that young people are at the vanguard of action on climate change. Although the protests were organised by a loosely co-ordinated collection of campaign groups, networks, platforms and movements, a new generation of prominent young advocates for change on climate change soon emerged. These included Greta Thunberg (born 2003, and who started the school strike for climate movement and was TIME magazine’s ‘Person of the year’ in 2019), Vanessa Nakate (born 1996, from Uganda, who spoke at COP25 in 2019), Luisa Neubauer (born 1996, and the face of the German climate strikes movement), Xiye Bastida (born 2002, and the US-Mexican activist who received the 2018 ‘Spirit of the UN’ award). At the same time, around the world, more radical activism such as Extinction Rebellion (XR) has attracted young environmental activists to take part in non-violent direct action, including lock-ons, die-ins and funeral marches (Pickard, Bowman and Arya 2020, 2021).

¹ Interviewed by Sarah Pickard (November 2021) for ongoing research at the time of drafting of this article.

Quite unusually for a youth-led social movement, some of their demands have been (at least partially) translated into clear policy pledges and initiatives. World leaders in several countries have made particular efforts to meet (and be seen to meet) young climate and environmental activists and to promise new targets for the reduction of Carbon emissions - although other powerholders and decisionmakers have condemned the young activists for being too immature to make demands from powerholders on climate change.

The growing acceptance of an Environmental and Climate Emergency also empowered young, 'radical' political representatives, such as United States Congresswoman Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez (Democratic Party), whose advocacy of a Green New Deal directly influenced the environmental turn of the incoming 2021 Biden administration. In other countries, this pro-environment wave has been reflected by increasing support for green parties in elections, especially amongst young people. At the European Parliament elections in 2019, the Greens/EFA EU-wide political grouping increased its number of seats by almost half compared to 2014 (European Parliament 2019). Moreover, the German Green Party was the most popular party amongst under 30s in both the 2019 European Parliament elections and also the 2021 Federal Election, winning sufficient support to enter the new coalition government in Berlin.

In the run-up to COP26, world leaders frequently claimed that they needed to make a deal for "future generations" or the "future of our children". For example, at the opening of COP26, US President Joe Biden asked: "Will we act? Will we do what is necessary? Will we seize the enormous opportunity before us? Or will we condemn future generations to suffer?" (The White House 2021). Similarly, the UK Prime Minister and COP26 co-chair argued at the Youth4climate pre-COP26 event in Italy: "young people around the world are already paying the price for the reckless actions of their elders... Your future is being stolen before your eyes, and I saw the protestors earlier on, and frankly you have every right to be angry with those who aren't doing enough to stop it" (UK Government 2021). With these words taken from Thunberg (see Pickard 2021), Boris Johnson seemed to harness and *instrumentalise* the power of youth protest to put pressure on countries during the COP26 negotiations and possibly to attract potential young voters.

Yet, the lack of direct youth input into the UN negotiations on climate change provides a reality check. As Thunberg spoke in Glasgow at the end of the FFF march, she proclaimed, "Change is not going to come from inside there. That is not leadership, this is leadership. ... We say no more blah blah blah, no more exploitation of people and nature and the planet. No more exploitation." Young people and especially young women are at the vanguard of environmental activism – raising the profile of climate change on the political agenda – but are still often viewed as outside the formal political process, rather than as agents of change.

This special issue of *The Journal of Youth Studies* explores youth environmental activism through a variety of lenses. The contributions investigate the motivations for youth activism and also examine how these actions take place through numerous modes of participation and across hybrid public spaces – whether that be via social

media, the ballot box, public squares and parks or privately-owned locations. The articles reveal how this activism unfolds across multiple spaces, including countries of the rich Global North and developing countries of the Global South. The youth-led actions at COP26 underlined the importance of global protests for global change on the climate crisis. The collection also considers the important role played by demographic factors, education, and new communication technologies in shaping this activism. In addressing each of these matters, the articles in this volume demonstrate how today's younger generations are transforming democratic politics on a global scale – reshaping attitudes, reconstituting political participation and also holding governments to account for their approaches towards (or indeed their neglect of) the complex environmental challenges associated with the climate crisis.

Context

Young people's lives have been (re)shaped by waves of crises (Pickard and Bessant 2017), which have impacted upon their everyday lives and everyday politics (Sloam 2020; Sloam and O'Loughlin 2021). The Great Recession had a disproportionate impact upon the economic prospects and wellbeing of younger generations (Henn et al. 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic, just over a decade later, provided another jolting blow to their lives. The Environmental and Climate Emergency has added a host of existential issues that must be addressed. It is well known that young people are most susceptible to new influences and ideas during their transition to adulthood (Flanagan 2013; Furlong 2016). The lives of the diverse generations born in the twenty-first century therefore have been affected by a specific set of circumstances – austerity, precarity, debt, environmental crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic – that inevitably impact upon their democratic participation. With each wave of crisis, we have witnessed a 'youthquake' in political participation – with vast, dynamic and largely horizontal flows of youth activism (Sloam and Henn 2019; Pickard 2019a, 2021).

The surge in young people's interest and participation in environmental politics in many countries of the Global North and the Global South is reflected in numerous campaigns, movements and contexts: from the School Strike movement (Fridays For Future) to Extinction Rebellion (XR), to community based environmental projects (Pickard 2019a and 2019b), to the increase in youth support for Green parties and policies across many democracies (Bomberg 2021). Furthermore, survey data confirm that environmental issues have risen to the top of young people's priorities – and these are also underpinned by a growth in 'cosmopolitan values' (Sloam and Henn 2019). The implications of these developments for the unfolding patterns and methods of youth political participation are profound.

However, questions have been raised about the extent to which this wave of environmental activism can and will be sustained in the wake of COVID-19, given the pandemic's dramatic impact upon the economic prospects and wellbeing of younger generations (OECD 2020). Indeed, youth engagement in environmental politics faces several challenges. In particular, young people's gaze is increasingly (and not surprisingly) drawn to economic and social issues (Meyer 2015), such as job security, the cost of housing, and mental health. There is also a 'cultural backlash', driven by

older generations, against cosmopolitan values (from opposition to cultural diversity, to the denial of human-made climate change) (Norris and Inglehart 2019). The policing of peaceful youth-led environmental protests is also a growing issue.

Environmental movements involving young people of all ages have reshaped the political landscape (della Porta and Diani 2020), bringing the subject to the fore in the media and impacting upon Government policy, such as through commitments to ambitious targets for the reduction of carbon emissions and the creation of citizens' assemblies on climate and environmental justice. The climate strike movements have also been at the forefront of democratic transformation, providing innovations in online political mobilisation and protest and 'renegotiating citizenship' (Boulianne et al. 2020; Collin and Matthews 2021). Moreover, there is evidence to show that skills and knowledge derived through environmental activism are transferred across to other causes, such as *Black Lives Matter* – BLM (Murray and Mohdin 2020).

The Special Issue

The existing literature tells us about *how* young people engage in environmental politics (Wahlstrom et al. 2019; Pickard, Bowman and Arya 2022), but we know relatively little about *why* they do (or do not) become engaged, *who* these young people are, or the extent to which engagement in environmental issues varies across different countries. In this special issue of the *Journal of Youth Studies* on 'Young People and Environmental Activism: The Transformation of Democratic Politics', we capture the diversity of youth engagement by looking at young people's activism across a wide range of countries. At the same time, the collection is sensitive to individual and shared characteristics such as socio-economic status, gender and ethnicity which have previously been revealed as correlating with youth political engagement and political participation (Henn et al. 2018).

This special issue explores matters related to young people and the interplay of environmental activism and the transformation of democracy, by:

1. studying the underpinning values and attitudes that foster *learning about* and *engagement with* environmental politics amongst younger generations;
2. examining whether - and if so, how - these values and attitudes act as mobilising forces in young people's political participation, both within the electoral arena and through activism in environmental movements;
3. investigating the role of cross-cutting issues such as education, political communication, life-style politics and also collectivism in shaping youth engagement in environmental politics.

In addressing these key matters, this special issue brings together a group of leading international scholars from complementary disciplines and sub-disciplines – including social movement studies, sociology, political science, political communication, developmental psychology, environmental studies, and education studies – to explore youth environmental activism from multiple theoretical perspectives and across a wide variety of countries.

The Special Issue comprises nine articles and is divided into two parts:

Part I: The first set of articles explore *the reimagining of democratic politics* in the light of changes in young people's values, attitudes and environmental activism. To start, **Flanagan, Gallay and Pykett** emphasize the need to reconceptualise politics more broadly as an 'Environmental Commons' and to harness the potential of citizen science to build trust and civic engagement in grass-roots democracy. The authors illustrate how the environment has often been perceived, in the United Nations context, as a 'pristine' wilderness. They argue that this traditional 'white' conception of the environment excludes many Americans from discussions over environmental issues. Finally, they demonstrate how inner-city, non-white high-school students can recapture this sense of agency through community research on the environmental issues that they care about.

Next, **Henn, Sloam and Nunes** examine data from the 2017 European Values Survey to consider the 'climate' views of over 1,500 young people living in ten 'established' European democracies. The authors explore how youth engagement with environmental politics in these countries is underpinned by value change – the increasing prevalence of postmaterialist and 'left-cosmopolitan' attitudes amongst younger generations, reflected in a prioritisation of environmental, social justice and redistributive policies, with a vision for more connected, humane and equitable societies. In doing so, the authors draw attention to divisions based on gender and educational attainment between those young people who share these values (and who engage with environmental politics) and those who do not.

Pickard then conceptualises the surge in young people's environmental activism across the world as "Do-It-Ourselves (DIO)" politics. This DIO politics engagement through a wide array of personal and collective political actions as a bottom-up response to perceived failures of mainstream electoral politics and lack of action from decisionmakers. The importance of "ourselves" is two-fold. First, it involves young citizens taking action themselves (as opposed to politicians). Second, it entails young people acting together, as a part of a global generational movement providing a sense of belonging, hope and political efficacy. The author contends that due to four interlocking factors, specific to current times, many young people form part of a global generation unit especially concerned about the environment using DIO politics to bring about positive change. The author draws on her fieldwork with young climate and environmental activists involved in Fridays for Future (FFF) and Extinction Rebellion (XR) in Britain and France.

Part II: The second set of papers provide rich empirical case studies of how pro-environmental attitudes have been translated into political action, demonstrating how this has had a *transformative effect upon democratic life*. First, **Scherman, Valenzuela and Rivera** show how environmental issues compete for attention within a crowded political space – illustrating how youth engagement in environmental movements is dependent upon the political context in Chile (such as government attitudes towards the environment and the prevalence of other social movements). In particular, they focus on the role of social media, revealing how social media use is positively associated with participation in environmental issues. Nevertheless, they also show

that this relationship has weakened over time, which underlines the importance of the specific stage of the protest cycle.

Next, **Boulianne and Ohme** provide empirical analysis of youth-led climate activism in Canada, France, the United Kingdom and the United States, stressing the role of social networks, political efficacy and political context in determining participation. Using data from a unique survey of 400 young people in each of these four countries, the findings indicate that social media use is a consistent and powerful predictor of environmental concern and activism. The authors conclude that by engaging with social media groups, young people are doing considerably more than 'liking' and 'following'; instead, social media offers them an especially important pathway to participation in more intensive collective actions such as protesting, boycotting, and signing petitions.

Following on, **Collin and Hilder** examine the emergence over 15 years of the Australian Youth Climate Coalition (AYCC) as an alternative to traditional and existing political structures and organisations, which are considered to have largely 'failed' in the struggle for climate justice. The authors point to the key role played by the everyday practices of this youth-led movement in building participation in 'trigger events', such as rallies and protests, which consolidate these networks. Through this case study of the AYCC, they propose the concept of "educative movement-building" to demonstrate how the coalition performs an important role in fostering political engagement, political identities and the acquisition of key civic skills considered highly valuable for successful climate activism.

Similarly, **Vogel et al.** highlight the role of grass roots activism amongst South African youth in creating youth agency for action against climate change. The authors note that the country faces acute challenges associated with climate change that will have dramatic and particular implications for the current and future youth generations if not addressed in the short-term. However, until recently, youth voice has been conspicuous by its absence at formal climate change negotiations led by government and civil society groups. Nonetheless, a study of the *Johannesburg Youth Climate Action Plan* process offers optimism that policymakers are now beginning to recognise an urgency in the need to embrace and harness young people's voices and energy in co-producing solutions to the climate crisis.

The last two papers are centred on lifestyle politics. **Kyroglou and Henn** focus on political consumerism as a form of environmental activism for young people which is contingent on understandings of the 'self'. Based on a quantitative survey of over 600 young people living in Greece and the UK, the study considers a range of personal motivations, as well as social identity as potential drivers of boycotting and buycotting. Importantly, the findings challenge the notion that engaging in these forms of political consumerism reflects an exclusively '*individualised-collective*' approach to environmental activism. Instead, the authors conclude that young people's boycotting and buycotting behaviours are '*collective-cosmopolitan*' in nature. The data indicate that they have an expanded subjective conception of the 'self' in which they engage in such actions to address responsibilities worldwide and also to protect the animal kingdom and the wider environment as a whole.

Zamponi, Baukloh, Bertuzzi, Chironi, della Porta and Portos investigate the role of lifestyle politics and generational specificities in mobilising participants in the international climate strike movement, which is part and parcel of broader trends in social movements towards identity politics. The authors develop results of innovative surveys at demonstrations, conducted in several countries during two global climate strikes to examine the framing of the causes of, and the solutions to, climate change. Building upon social movement studies that have focused on the interactions of activism in the street and transformations in lifestyle, the authors consider different combinations of reliance on institutional transformations and lifestyle transformations, looking at sociodemographic characteristics, as well as activism experiences and political attitudes, at the individual level.

As a collection, the articles in this special issue of the *Journal of Youth Studies* suggest that the recent surge in youth participation - and young people's positioning at the vanguard of the environmental protests witnessed across the Global North and the Global South - is in many ways unique and of an age. It is certainly the case that a series of intersecting industrial and economic transformations have taken place over recent decades that have created the conditions for successive youth cohorts and generations to engage with (or indeed, *disengage* from) formal institutionalised politics in ways that were somewhat different from their post-War predecessors. The emergence of highly educated, less deferential and critical citizens who have increasingly embraced a postmaterialist worldview since the 1960s, has led to many young people rejecting mainstream electorally-focused politics. Instead, they have tended to gravitate towards a more individualised or personalised style of politics of the everyday life, using a vast array of political participation methods to engage with issues (such as the climate crisis) on a case-by-case basis.

However, these processes and political practices have been accelerated by the 2008 global financial crisis followed by the Great Recession and by the waves of crisis that have since followed – and today's youth cohort has become increasingly politicised as a consequence. This political transformation has two overlapping dimensions which are emphasised in this special edition. The first is that the values and attitudes of young people have propelled them further away from those mainstream parties who had previously tended to dominate the electoral landscape in many countries of the Global North and several of the those in the post-independence Global South. The second dimension is that the nature of contemporary youth political and environmental activism is undergoing a process of transformation in terms of the innovative ways in which they are deploying new technologies – as well as a reimagining of the 'self' and of one's relationships with others.

The coalition of campaigns and groups which are leading the climate change protest is, in essence, a global social movement. They have their roots in processes that began some decades ago, but their profile and their impact are gathering pace – and the young people who have been at the forefront of this wave of activism have achieved a huge amount in a relatively short space of time in terms of how they have contributed to the shaping of global and national responses to the climate crisis. As a result, there

is occurring a transformation of democratic life in which there are important spaces and opportunities for youth agency to come to the fore.

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