Participation and Activism: Young people shaping their worlds

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Abstract

This paper explores contemporary youth activism and youth participation to identify the framework of change that characterises the formal and informal democratic political participation of young people. Spontaneous political activity of young people that challenges the state sits side by side with state facilitated youth participation projects. The similarities and differences between official projects and independent political activism are highlighted and analysed in the context of changing social policy, the marketisation of youth work, the history of youth participation and social movements and debates in youth and community work. A distinction is made between approaches to youth participation that see young people as consumers, as creators or simply as problematic. Attention is also drawn to the innovation of Young Mayor and Young Advisor Projects in town halls, current campaigns and alliances in the defence of a public sector that includes youth work based on a critical dialogue for transformative social change.

Key words: Youth Participation; activism, protest; civil society; Big Society.

AFTER POLICE shot dead Mark Duggan in 2011 people protested outside Tottenham police station looking for an explanation. Frustration and anger over a young black man being shot in an area where young black men are disproportionately stopped and searched by police triggered rioting in Tottenham that then spread across England. There is debate as to why individuals joined in with setting high streets alight, confronting the police and taking whatever they wanted, whether this was indicative of an instinctive act of solidarity in recognition of shared experiences of repressive policing or whether it was for other reasons. Nevertheless, there is some agreement that there are significant numbers of young people and adults who are alienated, angry and feel that mainstream society offers them little hope for a good life. Whereas in response to the 1981 riots, Lord Scarman and Michael Heseltine reformed policing and invested in the regeneration of the inner cities, in 2011 we have seen little sympathy from political leaders for the circumstances of the rioters.. If the riots were the ‘voices of the oppressed’, then the state was not interested in listening. Whereas many politicians have been prepared to welcome the rioting/unrest in Yemen and Tunisia, as the start of the ‘Arab Spring’, there has been little sympathy in political circles for similar events in England. Here it was deemed criminal on the basis that British democracy offers channels for
expressing dissent, opposition and change. This article is not a commentary on the riots. Rather it offers a critical analysis of the framework of change through democratic participation offered to young people, both through youth work and through the alternative forms of political activism that young people carved out independently of official structures in the run up to the 2011 riots.

At the end of 2010, a resurgence of youth activism in Britain following the Coalition Government’s austerity budget placed young people and their political engagement centre – stage. University occupations, college demonstrations, school student walk-outs and campaigns to defend youth facilities projected young people into the headlines as new civil rights activists and defenders of hard won rights and services. Simultaneously such young people were also dubbed ‘anarchists’ and ‘criminals’. Media images of falling fire extinguishers, breaking glass and flying metal barriers were accompanied by descriptions of young people out of control and hell bent on wreaking havoc on the streets and disrespecting establishment figures – whether through graffiti on a statue of Churchill, attacks on a royal car, or opposition to Coalition policies.

The emergence of a diverse new student and youth movement once again swept away the myth that young people are not interested in politics. Whether they responded to tuition fee hikes, the end of the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA), closure of specific youth centres or other service cuts, significant numbers of young people raised their voices against the Government’s decisions and also against attempts to prevent them from engaging in public protests. Young people tried to occupy buildings and public spaces such as the Tate Modern, the roof of Millbank Tower, the Green outside Parliament, university campuses, city banks and local streets but they were obstructed and prevented by police officers on horseback, with dogs or batons. Buildings were protected with additional security guards, streets were cordoned off with barriers and threats from senior police officers that young people who demonstrate might find themselves hurt or in trouble were publicised. Not only did these various methods appear to prevent young people from entering areas but they also stopped many from leaving.

There were both collective and individual consequences for those who took to the streets. Some were contained through a process of outdoor imprisonment termed ‘kettling’. Police on horseback were seen charging crowds and preventing people from leaving demonstrations, for others there was a risk of being arrested or stopped and searched. The mobilisations became highly charged experiential ‘crash courses’ in power and conflict for the young people who were involved and their families. Young people drew on their familiarity with digital technology to outmanoeuvre the police. The police in turn, monitored Facebook and Twitter to find out what was being planned. Some young people threw out the stale politics of the old left and introduced new tactics to avoid being kettled. Revamping old methods like occupations, they built new people’s coalitions in the face of the Coalition government.
In the midst of struggle, young people organising against cuts in education in England connected with large scale spontaneous protests in Tunisia, Yemen and Egypt. For example, the 29th January demonstration against cuts in education that was due to finish at Millbank, continued seamlessly on to join the protestors at the Egyptian Embassy. Such large scale informal political education that young people and their families are undergoing echoes much of the spontaneous student activity across other parts of the world, and may yet produce a broader youth social movement in the UK.

Ironically the British state’s efforts to manage and contain the spontaneous political activity of young people sits next to many state facilitated youth work initiatives to increase young people’s participation. Youth participation work has flourished in recent years, with ‘participation’ frequently discussed as a normative requirement in youth work policy and practice and in debates within related social science disciplines (Cooke and Kothari, 2001). Research funds, social policy, local and global political agendas, commissioning, education and inspection frameworks were all framed by a demand to increase political and institutional legitimacy or efficacy through greater user, client or citizen engagement. Many of the placards observed on demonstrations and the discourse surrounding the mobilisations at the centre of the current activism indicated a low level of perceived legitimacy of mainstream politics.

In this article, we seek to identify some of the similarities and differences between official youth participation projects and political activism that is independent of the state. We draw on our analysis of direct youth work practice, youth participation projects and more recent observations of young people’s protests against the tuition fees, abolition of the EMA, cuts to youth clubs and closure of neighbourhood services. We aim to identify different types of youth participation and explore what their distinctive as well as overlapping roles may be.

History of Youth Participation

‘Youth participation’ is widely presented as a recent development backed by the New Labour Government. One study on youth participation in local government stated:

_The subject of youth participation in both local and national politics has been an on-going political and policy concern in the UK and elsewhere since the early 1990s. The more recent decline in voting (across all age groups but particularly amongst young people) at local and national levels has raised the prominence of this issue and resulted in debates about the importance of encouraging youth participation in political life. In this context the case for youth participation has often been associated with concerns about the future health of democratic practice in Britain_ (Molloy et al, 2002: 15).
This latest upsurge in youth participation work was reinforced by the mapping conducted by the National Youth Agency and British Youth Council (NYA/BYC, 2004). This revealed that there was evidence of ‘considerable growth in the level of participation work’ since 2000. Despite youth participation being rediscovered and legitimised towards the end of the 20th century, it was of interest to youth workers and political activists long before this period. In his study of the history of youth work, Bernard Davies (1999) identified a series of initiatives to develop a youth voice in youth work throughout the 1970s. Moreover, youth work – along with its associated community work – has long been an agency for promoting youth participation in various guises, through training young people to become productive members of society, providing constructive leisure opportunities or managing behaviour. As Packham (2008:69) argues:

*Enabling participation is a central aim of youth and community work. Facilitating effective participation enables communities to have a voice and agency, and it assists service providers and policy makers to make sure that what they do is wanted and required, so being more efficient and effective.*

The history of youth participation begins long before the 1990s and is in effect the history of how youth work has been part of managing young people’s behaviour and ideas. The Woodcraft Folk, the Scouts and Guides through to present day empowerment projects are all concerned in some way with young people and their participation in society (Gilchrist, Jeffs and Spence, 2001). Youth participation is also part of the history of social movements, old and new. They were all concerned in some form with participation, for example girls work in early 20th century was about engaging young women workers in the question of industrial reform (eg.Turnbull, 2001) and after inner city revolts in 1981 Britain, participation was partly about creating channels for ethnic minority political engagement (Shukra, 1998).

While youth participation in itself is not new to youth work, under New Labour, ‘Youth participation’ was specifically championed. As Tony Taylor (2008) notes, the political participation of young people has gone from being feared by mainstream youth services of the 1980s to becoming ‘the flavour of the New Labour decade’. In reconstructing youth participation, what altered was the way it came to be described, articulated, valued, defined, understood and deployed in youth work. The acceptability of youth participation programmes was such that they were also supported across the mainstream political parties, at party conferences, in Conservative and Liberal Democrat-led local authorities as well as those under Labour. Youth participation has in effect become both professionally and politically uncontentious.

**Critiques of youth participation**

Despite participation being promoted as unproblematically good, critiques of youth participation
are not hard to find (e.g. Nelson and Wright, 1995). Critiques particularly focus on problems related to quality assurance or professional practice. Many question whether there is enough institutional support for youth participation and others on whether it is sufficiently valued, authentic or tokenistic (Sapin, 2009; Batsleer, 2008; Shier, 2001; Arnstein, 1969). Consequently youth work training and literature often focuses upon improvement and addresses the required skills and knowledge that youth workers should develop to become better at delivering youth participation work (Sapin, 2009; Batsleer, 2008 Badham and Wade, 2008). Some critics have gone further and questioned the shift from participation as an aspiration to be encouraged and cultivated, to becoming a policy driver that demands engagement in a contractual or coercive way (Clark, 2008; Croft, 2008). Some have even described the drive towards ‘participation’ as a new form of ‘tyranny’ that allows dominant groups to reassert power or correct deviant behaviour (Cooke and Kothari, 2001).

Critical thinkers in youth work, including Bernard Davies (2005), Jean Spence et al, (2006), Mark Smith (1999, 2002), Tony Jeffs (2001) and Tony Taylor (2008) have identified building relationships based on voluntary participation as a vital starting point for youth work of any kind. The ‘voluntary principle’, as it has become known, is core to the process of finding a voice, informal or political education, critically responding to social policy, promoting democracy, equality and inclusivity, and as such it is understood as crucial to a non-coercive approach to participation. The voluntary principle came under enormous pressure under New Labour as youth work was conflated with preventative, targeted work such as that delivered by Connexions, some work with young offenders and the focus on ‘NEEThood’ (Davies and Merton, 2009). The central tenet of young people’s voluntary involvement in youth work is continuing to struggle to survive under the Coalition’s approach to volunteering.

In their bid to turn excluded young people into productive members of civil society and the market economy, New Labour strongly encouraged young people’s uncritical engagement in mainstream society. A whole raft of policy developments took notions of youth participation and community engagement (voluntary or coercive) out of the fringes and into the centre of government policy and local governance. The Education and Inspections Act (2006) and Aiming High for Young People (July 2007) secured local positive activities for young people, and enabled some youth control of or access to budgets and services (National Youth Agency and Local Government Association, July 2008). Under the Coalition Government, this type of participation continues as a central theme in its plans to develop a National Citizens Service, increasing youth volunteering as well as insisting on participation in community work in exchange for benefits.

**Mainstreaming Youth Participation**

The policy framework surrounding youth work has long supported a participative approach, though it may not have been promoted locally and its intention may never have been to develop
critical understanding of social and political relations. Tony Taylor (2008) demonstrated that the Albermarle Report called for including young people in the political process and setting up Youth Councils as early as in 1959. Taylor also argued that when youth workers attempted to put this into practice, they were disciplined for it. By contrast, towards the end of New Labour’s time in government, a plethora of youth participation projects, youth parliaments, the NYA campaign *Hear By Right* and more recently Young Mayor Projects were being replicated around the country and eliciting interest from across Europe. Several developments allowed for youth participation to be mainstreamed in this way:

1. The quantity and range of policies and associated resources demanding greater participation boosted the support for engaging young people as well as adults in decision-making (Packham, 2008). These included policy drivers relating to the promotion of ‘active citizenship’ (Crick, 1998), ‘social inclusion’ and ‘community cohesion’ (Cantle, 2008). Internationally, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child established the right of children to be listened to in Article 12. Nationally, consultation rights were also included in policies such as Children Act 2004 and Education Act 2002 (NYA, 2009).

2. Youth participation came to be seen as a solution to a perceived ‘democratic deficit’ and the alienation of young people from party politics. It became a panacea for growing youth alienation, gang warfare, urban incivility, disorder and cynicism towards representative democracy. At the same time that new forms of discourse that demonised young people were taking root, town halls were ‘opening up’. Council governance structures and local political organisations came under pressure to make the inclusion of citizens in governance processes visible. The 2006 Power Inquiry recommended a requirement on all public bodies to involve the public in decision making and policy development (Lowndes, et al, 2006).

3. Policy makers committed themselves to greater local control through a new localism and a ‘voice and choice’ agenda. This involved local authorities engaging communities in decision making over services (Blake, 2008). Under the Coalition Government, localism remains a key plank in their reforms, which suggests community engagement may be encouraged in the commissioning of local services. This requires youth participation if implementation of localism is to reflect the interests of younger citizens. The National Youth Agency’s *Participation Strategy Review Group Report* (2010:6-7) notes the difficulties of maintaining participatory work in the new economic climate. With shrinking resource allocation it argues that the rights based approach to participation work might be strengthened by promoting a ‘value for money’ case for youth participation.

4. The emasculation of organised working class and social movements of the 1970s produced decades of negotiations and settlements in safe and acceptable frameworks of conflict. Fear of
participation declined as dissent was absorbed through those channels. The State has therefore come to rely on citizen participation by working through institutional frameworks such as trade unions, student unions, school councils or minority organisations. 2009 was a year that saw riots, direct action around Europe and the emergence of new movements, from globalisation and climate change protests to anti-war protests and G20 demonstrations. While strong civic participation was encouraged, independent activism was met with the full force of the law. The policing of protests and activism redefined legitimate participation as participation that takes place as a non-threatening activity that can be controlled, managed or policed. State attacks on student and youth protests that occurred under the Coalition continued in this vein as students confronted their own student union president for limiting the opposition to education cuts. In Manchester in January 2011, the police protected the student union president on the grounds of safety, whilst simultaneously kettling protestors.

Participative approaches, alongside Bernard Crick’s (1998) call for the political education of young people through universal citizenship education in schools and other changes were part of a broader agenda for ‘civil renewal’ (Keaney, 2006). This produced a turnaround in how youth participation work and engaging young people in politics were viewed. Crick’s (1998) work, for example, recognised that young people could legitimately be critically engaged in discussing and understanding the political world around them and their role within it. They also threw up several important tensions/contradictions in youth work. Firstly, whilst central government increasingly called for youth engagement in the design and delivery of services, youth work was also driven by market forces and national targets. New Labour’s Active Citizenship agenda conflicted with the marketisation of youth work. As one think tank report put it: ‘New Labour has been known to devolve with one hand while centralising with the other. In ministerial speeches, issues such as ‘new localism’, citizen empowerment and civil renewal tend to jostle for space with talk of more audits, targets and regulation’ (Rogers, 2006:2). This dichotomy threw up contradictory services for young people so that the same authorities that implemented control orders (eg. ASBOs) and surveillance of young people also sponsored youth empowerment initiatives.

Secondly, youth participation programmes, whatever their intentions, both challenge power relations and give legitimacy to existing structures at the same time. Whilst giving a sense of power, controls are inevitably kept on the work/young people by the adult advisors, structures and funding. Whilst these tend to be motivated by a concern to be supportive, empowering and concerned for the safety of participants, there is always the potential for restrictions to feel controlling and disempowering. The idea that youth work can have a social control as well as an empowering function is hardly new (Rosseter, 1987). It has always been, and remains today, one of the most important aspects of negotiating the youth worker’s role with employers and the state and is a crucial element in the art of youth work.
Thirdly, by linking citizenship and social cohesion, New Labour created an expectation that young people need to take citizenship classes in order to participate effectively and shift from the realms of deviance to become respectable young people. The 2009 Borders, Citizenship and Immigration Act created an ‘active citizenship’ route through which migrants must show evidence of volunteering and civic participation activity in any application for citizenship (Grove-White et al, 2010). This was an important move away from thinking of citizenship as a right that is available to all, towards treating it as something that is certifiable by a portfolio of volunteering experience with an exam in understanding ‘Britishness’ which might allow access to mainstream society. Under the coalition government this link between volunteering and citizenship may well be extended as a passport for those who are citizens to access even benefits. As youth participation becomes more closely linked to volunteering programmes and questions of citizen responsibilities, there is a need to consider how these relate to the range of youth participation approaches.

**Market-driven youth participation**

An important aspect of youth participation is centred on the idea that it is the responsibility of young people to participate in the market-place, primarily as workers. This sort of participation takes socially excluded young people through accredited programmes and aims to make them market-ready, so that they are able to compete in the global labour market. Participation of young people is as customers of education or training in order to achieve an identity or ‘market value’ (Pye and Muncie, 2001) as a worker. This is a modernised version of early 20th century market-driven participation models such as the earliest girls clubs that were concerned to improve the prospects of unskilled working class young people in industrial and political life whether through training or improved conditions (eg.Turnbull, 2001: 98-99). Projects like Young Enterprise which go into schools and run programmes to encourage young people to think about their futures, sometimes introducing them to psychometric testing, are contemporary examples of this approach. Such methods, it is argued by Jeffs and Smith (2006), reflect a change in youth work, from being an informal educational process of identity-creation and self-actualisation through processing experiences, to a technical one of fostering employability and transition to work.

In addition to this market-driven version there have been two other approaches to youth participation that have been deployed; these are both civil society centred youth participation approaches. One of them encourages young people to be viewed as consumers and the other turns young people into creators.

**Civil Society Approach:**

**Youth participation with young people as consumers**

This form of youth participation is the type identified by a mapping exercise carried out for the National Youth Agency and British Youth Council:
When asked about approaches which involved children and young people alongside adults, respondents from both statutory and voluntary sectors reported that public meetings, consultation documents and question and answer sessions were most commonly used. Statutory sector respondents also reported frequent use of service user forums, while voluntary organisations were likely to involve children and young people in decision-making bodies and committees.

- In both sectors, the most popular approaches specifically targeting children and young people were researching their needs and views, informal discussion and youth councils or forums.
- The tasks that children and young people undertake most frequently to inform decision-making in statutory and voluntary organisations are representing their peers and attending meetings. They are less likely to be involved in more strategic level tasks, such as developing frameworks for assessing services, budget setting or assessing suppliers. However, two-fifths of organisations in both sectors involve children and young people in staff selection (Oldfield and Fowler, 2004:1-2).

Some Youth Parliaments, Young Mayors, Youth Councils, Youth Forums and *Hear By Right* Participation Works programmes have been particularly effective at developing this civil society approach to participation with the objective of training young people in participation skills/engagement/citizenship so that they can readily understand an existing service, structure, system and negotiate within its confines as consumers of those services. This involves change in the form of improvements to services offered through co-operation in consultation exercises that allow young people to choose between pre-determined options. ‘Mystery shopper’ projects adopted by some local authority participation projects and supported by the National Youth Agency’s *Hear By Right* campaign exemplify this model. A young people’s forum in this context tends to concentrate on creating governance structures for young people that shadow existing adult structures. Usually, this will be centred on ways of including young people in civic society with the role of any Youth Advisor being primarily to provide training and knowledge of service/system/structures so that young people engage more effectively with them. The youth advisor of course acts as a gatekeeper, facilitating, shaping and perhaps even limiting participation processes.

The *Hear by Right* programme has sponsored this approach. It provides standard toolkits, kitemark, self-assessment tools and strongly argues for training to be incorporated. *Hear by Right* also requires outcomes to be identified and measured, which can be beneficial to those services who need to argue their case for continued funding or support (Badham and Wade, 2008). This form of citizenship work is reliant on what Freire (1972) describes as ‘banking education’ to produce political literacy and capacity-building of individuals so they can exercise their right to be involved and engaged. This is increasingly presented as a ‘responsibility’ rather than a right. Community cohesion is also produced in a particular way: promoting ‘Britishness’, assimilation, inclusion and conformity (Shukra et.al 2004).
The young person at the centre of this work is largely treated as a consumer of education, training or services and a subject with responsibilities to help improve services and to increase voter turnout. This type of youth work seeks to address gaps in young people’s skills and knowledge base that support them to adjust any patterns of behaviour that may be limiting their development or engagement, for example, the concern about young people’s political apathy being a result of their lack of knowledge of how the political system works.

Ideologically, the development of such skills and knowledge encourage greater engagement, understanding and faith in mainstream processes. Far from encouraging collective change and self-actualisation, such an approach seeks an active conformity and social control by garnering consent for the way that society is organised.

**Civil Society: Youth participation with young people as creators**

The objective of this alternative approach is to create the space for youth dialogue, discussion, debate and informal learning so young people can decide what they want to do and how they want to do it. As with the first civil society approach, a key area of change would include the development of the young person’s understanding and personal development, but this may be less formally delivered than the other approaches. Rather, it is more consistent with youth work as informal and political education with the youth advisor being a facilitator of critical discussion and experiential learning. To maintain the space for such creativity, however, it may nevertheless be necessary and professionally advisable for the youth advisor to retain a level of leadership in how compromises between politicians, officers and young people would be best discussed and negotiated. The youth advisor in this context is required to be highly skilled in navigating the service, systems and structures and identifying potential for young people to help redefine them.

A young people’s forum based on these principles creates a space for democratic deliberations. The informality involved here doesn’t require that existing structures be shadowed but can create new forms defined by young participants. As such, this can become a space where the civil and civic may come together and where the views of the young people, local political actors and the youth workers can constructively collide. This approach places great demands on all parties but the benefits are equally large. A developing sense of citizenship through political education so that young people can exercise their right to change, creativity and dissent is one of the possible rewards.

A strong focus on group work to develop a sense of collectivity is central to the required cohesion to build new networks and solidarities based on the transparency and accountability of individuals to groups. The individual young person becomes an active critic and creator of both form and content (eg. agendas and structures). Potentially this approach is emancipatory in allowing young
people to develop independent, critical analyses of themselves and the world around them. It can create opportunities to define how young people want to produce change – collectively as well as individually.

**Young Mayor and Young Advisor Projects**

One particular contemporary approach combines elements from a number of participatory approaches: Young Mayor and Young Advisors programmes. As relative newcomers to youth participation work, they were not visible in the National Youth Agency and British Youth Council (NYA/ BYC) mapping of youth participation. They offer opportunities for young people to engage in formal political processes and also address the limitation of some youth participation projects identified by the NYA/BYC. Whereas other projects focus on helping young people making their voices heard, these projects enable young people to shape and speak to strategic issues and resource allocation.

One of the first Young Mayor projects emerged in 2004, creating the office of Young Mayor as an annually elected position with a yearly budget of £30 000. While there is variation in the ways that Young Mayor projects around the country are structured and organised, one example is that of a project that has an elected Young Mayor who is guided and supported by a group of Young Advisors. Young Mayor and Young Advisors are further supported by full time senior officers based in the Mayor’s Office. Such projects fulfil different objectives for different constituents, which is arguably why it has continued to gain such widespread support. For local politicians it can address the democratic deficit by involving young people in electoral processes (eg. one project achieved a 48% turnout in young mayor elections compared to a 25% turnout in adult elections). For the young people it is an opportunity to influence decisions and help shape spending and local projects. For schools, it adds to their own citizenship activities. For youth workers it exemplifies a form of citizenship work that moves beyond turning young people into passive consumers of other people’s agendas. Instead it can be about cultivating active, opinionated young people who develop through collective political learning and activity.

Young mayoral programmes can also provide local authorities and service providers with an informed consultation group, though the young people decide in which consultations they will participate and on what basis. They provide an official figurehead in the form of a Young Mayor (directly elected by young people) who works to reporting structures such as to a Council Cabinet. Young mayors can be well prepared by a hustings process, campaign trail and election training programme to support them in standing for election. In some projects, many of the young advisors are young people who have been through the election process. While they may not have won the mayoralty, they are able to participate as advisors to the elected Mayor. Advisors do not have to undergo any accredited citizenship training programmes. Instead the emphasis is on working
collectively with other young people, sharing views on how to spend the group’s budget, deciding which strategic opportunities to engage with and learning from each other through discussion and activity. Residential and international exchanges support the crucial process of group development. Engagement in these democratic processes and group activities in turn facilitates the personal development of individual young people, some of whom have entered higher education institutions on the strength of this work rather than their formal qualifications.

A visit to one Young Mayor’s programme from an Ofsted inspector highlighted how central young people’s views are in this programme. In talking to a young person from the Young Mayor’s project an Ofsted inspector asked ‘what training did you take so you could be part of this project?’ The Young person replied: ‘What training do I need to have an opinion?’ Formal training can of course be useful in many contexts. This particular programme enables experienced young people to train and support young people through the hustings process during elections. But if the objective is to allow young people to articulate their views, it may not be training that is lacking, but spaces in which young people feel that they can readily give their views. A critical youth work practice assumes that young people already have developing views and skills – whether the worker agrees with them or not. What the young people are understood to need are the opportunities to debate their ideas, challenge each other’s views, test out ideas and refine them. It is in the creation of safe spaces where this can happen that the youth worker can also play a supportive though critical role.

The theoretical and ideological approaches that support this approach are drawn from Freire’s (1972) alternative approach to education to produce ‘conscientization’ together with the Gramscian focus on challenging dominant ideologies (Burke, 1999, 2005). A confident youth work praxis based on these ideas can support young people to develop a critical consciousness. In this way, youth participation can nurture the questioning of taken for granted ideas. In the civic realm, youth participation channels those ideas into discussions, meetings, consultations and project development. Youth Parliaments allow for annual open sharing of young people’s critical views in the House of Commons when it is vacated by MPs so that young people can hold debates. School children can raise their issues in the structures of school council meetings and university students can debate their concerns in student union meetings.

**Why protest?**

So why, despite all the training in formal political participation and the forums for debate available to them, do so many young people also become active in protests? Why did young people take to the streets, organise rallies to defend their youth provision or occupy buildings in protest? In the course of our observations with young people during the demonstrations, occupations, actions and rallies the following sentiments were repeatedly expressed:
1. A feeling that most formal engagement opportunities were at the local level whereas the decisions they were protesting about were either taken nationally or shaped by central government decisions;

2. A feeling of being duped by campaign election promises that were not kept – placards and banners on many anti-war and anti-cuts protests have depicted politicians across the mainstream political spectrum as ‘liars’ or hypocrites;

3. Heightened levels of anger and fear about the severe consequences for themselves or their families of the decisions being protested against;

4. A sense of urgency because of the fast pace of decision making;

5. An urge to connect with others on the issues and express their outrage;

6. A sense of injustice and unfairness in decision making;

7. A wish to support an organisation calling for support e.g. a student union or a campaign group;

8. A wish to be part of or building a wider opposition or a counter-coalition;

9. A need to continue using a provision or service being closed down;

10. Feeling motivated or inspired to protest or ‘walk like an Egyptian’ e.g. by high profile protests elsewhere.

This protest form of participation sits alongside and outside the sphere of youth participation work not because the aspirations of the young people are different. The difference between youth participation as social movement activism and youth participation as a form of youth work lies primarily in the former’s sense of its own independence. In a social movement context, the participants form a variety of movement campaigns and organisations, some of which may be more tightly controlled by organisers than others – but if they start to become part of the state they may start to become emasculated. It is possible, however, for youth participation projects to break out of these constraints and develop their own agendas. Similarly some university students challenge the official student union bodies when they feel constrained. It is also possible for individual actors to identify with all three types of participation: market-centred, civil society and activist.

While the police, media and politicians have created demons out of many young protestors, social
movement activism has historically transformed attitudes and produced cultural shifts, for example, youth movements in the 1960s and 70s encouraged women and minorities to participate more fully in public life. This suggests that social movement activists approach conflict as potentially positive and recognise the significance of ideological struggle in organising for social change. Similarly, some youth workers work with young people drawing on critical education approaches where young people are supported in a group to produce a collective agenda taking into account both the matters that effect or interest them and the diverse views of the young people in the group. Constructive, mutual challenge can be cultivated to develop solidarity and strong relationships in the process of building and reinforcing trust through ongoing contact and conversation. At its best, this democratic approach is valued for producing a strong sense of ownership, commitment and identification with the programme and the civic structures that support it. Such youth programmes can include a flexible, hybrid offer of civic engagement, volunteering and activism with young people engaging in one or more of these areas and experiencing how each can shape the other.

Independent Political Activity or Youth Participation in the Big Society

Until David Cameron’s re-launch in February 2011, his ‘Big Society’ concept remained a fluid and vague concept. It has since become apparent that ‘Big Society’ is the coalition’s prime social policy mechanism to restructure the welfare state, including the broad field of community and youth work for the new ‘age of austerity’. The ‘Big Society’ agenda draws on ideas of citizenship through locally organised volunteering and philanthropy dressed in the radical clothes of the community organising model of community work associated with American activist, Saul Alinsky (1969). Without the context of devastating cuts to the welfare state – including youth services and voluntary and community sectors – there may have been greater support for big society as an alternative ideological approach to civil society. But the rebranding of civil society as either ‘Big Society’ or ‘the Good Society’ has been highly contested. The ideological battles being fought to encourage greater buy-in to the ‘Big Society’ include the struggles between the idea of a market driven society and private enterprise taking precedence over people’s welfare. The idea is that privatised provision is inherently superior to state services, that people who want to see services running should run them voluntarily rather than be paid by the public purse. The battle over responsibility for mediating the crisis and allocating blame for it includes the construction of a myriad of new folk devils and moral panics – from migrants taking jobs and housing to people who are obese putting a strain on health services.

Young people’s contribution to the ‘Big Society’ and a major route into employment suggested by government involves volunteering. Volunteering is presented as a public good, building the skills of the volunteer and keeping the individual engaged in work routines. In this form volunteering is conceived of as an activity or a form of labour. It is rooted in market led thinking but as there are
few employment opportunities, its capacity to achieve the aim of increasing youth employment is severely limited. The experience of the 1980s austerity led Youth Training Scheme (YTS) and Community Programme (CP) was that individuals often moved from the programme back onto benefits. The main value of the schemes at that time seemed to be the removal of those on the schemes from official unemployment statistics and a socialisation into accepting lower wages and less secure employment than they might have previously expected.

But during the 1980s and 1990s recessions it was community and youth work that provided the spaces for young people to think and develop. London had the advantage in that era of a well-resourced youth provision through its Inner London Education Authority (ILEA). Following the riots of 1981 and 1985, a series of regeneration funds distributed by central government bypassed local authorities and also provided financial support. Prioritising business and enterprise and a community and voluntary sector it supported some of the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods. In 2012 it is many of the high profile voluntary and community sector leaders who are emphasising that rather than offering support for the infrastructure to develop Cameron’s big society the cuts resulting from the 2010 Comprehensive Spending Review are forcing the closure of key community and voluntary sector agencies. This is true of adult and youth services too. Will the loss of so much youth work provision leave young people with fewer avenues for expressing their dissatisfaction and dissent?

Historically we have seen youth and community workers intervene to manage, mediate and control social unrest and outbreaks of violence, from fights between young people to local tensions with the police or even managing tensions over racial violence. A youth worker might intervene to reduce the prospects of people hurting each other or being arrested and perhaps seek to create more constructive channels for people to deal with the issues causing the tensions. These interventions are not usually visible or vaunted but they are valuable and more frequent than members of the public might imagine. Occasionally, the youth worker is wounded in the process. If youth services and youth participation operations are removed, as are the spaces in which young people can safely negotiate their issues under the supervision of another adult, so are the spaces that help young people to identify constructive strategies for improving their lives, whether personal, social, educational or political. They provide positive outlets for anger and frustration. The civility, mutual respect and informal learning that youth workers seek to cultivate through their participatory programmes provides a crucial service not just to young people, but for us all and is a vital precursor to any form of conscientization.

This article has sought to identify the diversity in youth participation approaches – all of which are able to make valuable contributions to the lives of young people and their localities. Some approaches emphasise finding employment whilst others focus on civic or civil society engagement. Without employment, young people and their families may not feel fully engaged with society and
are at risk of impoverishment or being pushed into alternative economies. Engagement with civil society oriented youth participation might develop young people’s skills and understanding for deployment at work and in their neighbourhoods. It might equally help them develop a critical understanding of how they can actively contribute to changing society so that everyone can be educated, be healthy, earn and have a roof over their heads.

**Conclusion: Towards Building New Youth-Led Services for Young People**

While New Labour had firmly established itself as the government of youth participation and engagement in the context of its wider inclusion and cohesion agendas, the Coalition government has introduced austerity measures that may destroy the programmes and infrastructure that has been built up over many decades (Nicholls, 2011). Instead the Coalition government promotes the notion of a Big Society, large scale volunteering and its own brand of localism. What does this mean for the sort of youth participation that can or needs to be promoted and developed now?

There is of course an urgency to defend the services for young people and the jobs that are being axed. As this article is being written, a movement is developing, led by unions, local campaigns and students. The process of defending jobs and services is itself an educational and politicisation process akin to youth participation. But as lines get drawn, young people, communities and youth workers, like other workers and community groups, are driven to activism. The Choose Youth Campaign is a case in point, bringing together a diverse range of bodies – many of them established mainstream organisations – that represent significant groups in youth work not accustomed to campaigning in the way they have felt forced to do this year. Members of Choose Youth not only include two major trade unions (Unite and Unison) but also the National Youth Agency, British Youth Council, NCVYS, In Defence of Youth Work, For Youth’s Sake, TAG:the professional association for Lecturers in Community and Youth Work, MPs, the Woodcraft Folk and others. Choose Youth developed two broad methods to resist cuts in youth work provision: parliamentary lobbying and mobilisation for protest, recognising their shared interests against government decisions. In this campaign it is also necessary to confirm that youth participation is not inherently ‘good’ or neutral and that ‘participation’ is an ideologically loaded term used by people drawing on conflicting ideological positions whilst presenting the term as though it’s neutral (Nelson and Wright, 1995). Thus youth participation in work for benefits is quite different to youth participation that offers opportunities to shape services. To imagine otherwise risks glossing over coercive and assimilationist aspects of some approaches to participation that may be emerging and require further critique.

Central to youth work are also conversation and association. The content of conversations can vary considerably depending on the values and perspectives that inform the worker’s understanding and outlook. In visioning what a 1970s youth service should look like at an earlier time of high levels...
of political activism, Milson-Fairbairn (Dept. of Education and Science, 1969 Para 158) recognised that the whole enterprise of youth work is inherently ideological and that the political perspective one holds informs the youth work one does. They confirmed that: ‘We find ourselves unable to answer the question “what kind of youth service do we want?” – until we have answered the previous question – “what kind of society do we want?” In the most stringent sense, we think that a value free approach is not feasible’. For youth workers, community organisers and managers, that involves us in being as transparent and open about our objectives as possible and asking a series of difficult and sometimes uncomfortable questions: What sort of society do we want? What are the barriers and opportunities to developing this? Who are the agents of change and their allies? How can we shape a youth service that supports young people in building such a society?

An approach that seeks to answer these questions in conversation with young people could be immensely honest, transparent and radical. It might make visible the too often invisible ideas, beliefs, politics and perspectives of youth workers and managers who present themselves as neutral or objective. In doing so it could allow for greater transparency and therefore allow people to challenge each other’s work and decisions in an informed way. It would minimise the potential for ideological differences to be interpreted as matters of personality conflicts and allow workers to construct alliances and groupings on a principled basis. This is an approach to youth work that those who speak of ‘historical’ (Davies, 2009) or ‘critical youth work’ (Taylor, 2009) have adopted since Milson-Fairburn. It frees up youth workers to think beyond the parameters of social policy and management frameworks. It allows young people to think freely. It is a youth work with integrity because it is not asking young people to open up about their views publicly whilst we pretend to each other that what we do is value-neutral. It asks that we also commit ourselves as youth workers to participating in critical debate and dialogue about what sort of world we want to live in and where youth work fits in or doesn’t fit in to achieving that. In the transformative spirit of Freire (1972) and Alinsky (1969) we, as workers, are required to be honest about where we come from ideologically and aim to engage as learners as much as facilitators of deliberation. That is a way of working with young people and their communities in the present and the future.

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