

## Beyond the Blame Game: Examining ‘The Discourse’ of Youth Participation in Australia

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### Abstract

Youth sociological research has focused on the ways that ‘moral panics’ and ‘risk discourses’ have been used to discipline young people. This paper discusses ‘declining youth participation’, primarily in an electoral context, as a risk discourse resulting in a moral panic. Instead of focusing on defending young people from charges of disassociation and apathy (the approach most common in youth sociological studies) it instead looks at how ‘the literature’ on youth participation has evolved. Within this literature it examines construction of the ‘problem’ of young people’s lack of participation, Australia’s democracy and the young person accused of not participating in this democracy. Borrowing loosely from Foucault I examine this discursive regime, exposing how power operates within it. I argue that it is necessary to move beyond accusing or defending young people and to shift the focus of this discourse from a *moral* focus to one on ‘telos’ and where democracy and ‘the state’ are the foci.

**Keywords:** youth, participation, Australia, ‘participation literature’, power, ‘risk discourse’, ‘moral panic’

A common theme in discussions around ‘youth’ is an allegation that young people tend not to ‘participate’ socially, politically and in their communities, leading to accusations of civic deficiency and apathy. A number of measures have been taken of young people’s perceived declining participation. Putnam (2000) catalogues young people’s waning social capital and other studies have measured interest in, and knowledge about, politics and civic affairs, usually finding a ‘lack’ (Galston 2001, Torney-Purta et al. 2001). The most tangible measure of this purported declining participation, because it can be analysed statistically, is of young people’s participation as voters in elections. Whereas the last two Presidential Elections in the US have produced relatively high youth voter turnouts it is the case that more

generally youth turnouts are low. For example in the United Kingdom in 2005, only 37% of registered young people turned out to vote in the General Election (The Electoral Commission 2005), and even in Australia where voting is compulsory there are concerns about the under-enrolment of youth (AEC 2003).

This has produced a flurry of action amongst policy-makers and researchers, particularly political sociologists. Young people have been held to task for being disinterested, disconnected, and disassociated, and their political attitudes, behaviour and knowledge has been scrutinised. This has produced a large body of literature where young people have been the 'subject', and attempts have been made to elicit their 'truths', similar to Foucault's *scientia sexualis* (Foucault 1987). Whereas research papers have found themes and positions within this literature there has not been much discussion of how this literature has 'come together' in a fashion where it can be described as 'the literature' on youth participation, or perhaps the 'science' of young people and their participation. Borrowing loosely from Foucault in this paper I examine the 'discourse' of youth participation in the Australian context (Foucault 1987, 2002). In this endeavour I expose some operations of power and show how they have shaped and constructed 'truths' of youth political participation. Finally I make an argument for asking different questions, and questions in different ways, about young people's participation, shifting enquiries from a *moral* focus to one on '*telos*'.

In Australia 'facts' about young people's 'participation deficit' were built around evidence provided by statistical data (see for example, SCEET 1988, Civics Expert Group 1994). But facts are different from 'truths', and the question of interest here is how 'truths' of young people and their participation were produced. The 'dominant' discourse of youth participation in Australia was shaped in the late 1980s by discussion of a Constitutional Referendum possibly leading to a Republic. This

provoked debate and discussion regarding public knowledge of the Constitution. In 1988 the Senate Select Committee on Education, Employment and Training [SSCEET] called for public submissions on 'Education for Active Citizenship In Schools and Youth Organisations' (SSCEET 1988). Important at the outset are, first, that young Australians were targeted as particularly deficient, second the establishment of a term to describe an ideal of participation, 'active citizenship', and, third that this discussion paper also nominated the sites in, and, by inference, the methods by, which young active citizens would be created.

Responses were various. Those from youth advocacy organizations spoke of the marginalisation and disempowerment of young people, and some young people talked about ways they had been involved (SSCEET 1988). But the most persistent themes were young people's deficiencies of knowledge, their cynicism, and lack of trust (SSCEET 1988). The Secretariat of the SSCEET highlighted low levels of political knowledge amongst the young, and claimed that the young 'were the group most likely not to be enrolled to vote' (SSCEET, 1988: 5). Young people's attitudes were also problematised. A 1983 survey was referenced in its finding that the most common reason for young people not enrolling to vote was that 'they do not see any direct link between the government or government institutions and their own lives' (SSCEET 188: 6). Apathy was also at issue and it was found that Australia's young 'reach 18 years without any feelings toward or knowledge of our political system and what it means to live in a democracy' (SSCEET 1988: 6).

The resulting policy document, *Education for Active Citizenship* (SSCEET 1989), retained a focus on a construction of a young person indifferent to government institutions and having a 'sense of exclusion from democratic life', failings that were largely attributed to ignorance fuelled apathy (SSCEET 1989: 15). In addition,

education for 'active citizenship', it was considered, should encourage a 'positive attitude towards participation in Australia's democratic system' (SSCEET 1989: 34). The report also put some flesh on the bones of the 'active citizen' prefigured in the discussion paper, describing an active citizen as one who 'not only believes in the concept of the democratic society but who is willing and able to translate that belief into action' (SSCEET 1989: 7). Not surprisingly, given the prefiguring of the problem and the solution even in the title of the original discussion paper, the path to achieving 'active citizens' was considered to lie through education and the provision of knowledge and skills.

These themes have changed little in the policy discourse. *Whereas The People*, (Civics Expert Group 1994), an inquiry into general civic knowledge in Australia, identified young people as having a particular knowledge-based 'civic deficit' (Civics Expert Group 1994: 45) and clearly outlined an educative strategy to remedy this. In introducing *Discovering Democracy* Dr David Kemp, the then Federal Minister for Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, cited studies of political knowledge to argue 'few young Australians realised they were heirs to one of the world's most successful and pioneering democracies'. He also stated 'young Australians must gain a sound knowledge of the evolution of our pioneering democracy if its success and vigour is to survive in the next century' (Kemp n.d.). Australian school students now 'discover democracy' through this curriculum. Yet, angst about participation remains. The Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters [JSCEM] meets after each Federal Election in Australia to discuss 'matters concerning' that election. Following the 2004 Federal Election in Australia this committee called a special inquiry aimed at investigating the under-enrolment a number of groups, but particularly of youth, in Australia. The terms of this Inquiry

highlighted the ‘little interest in Australian political affairs’ displayed by young people, and linked this with low levels of civic literacy (JSCM 2006). Thus, returning to the focus on education as a solution, the Inquiry called for submissions aimed at investigating the ‘quality of education provided to’ and improving the ‘electoral awareness’ of, youth.

The ‘truth’ that was created was thus of a robust, healthy and worthy democracy put into danger by a young person who was constructed as apathetic and uncaring about a range of participatory activities, but who could be ‘saved’, made into an ‘active citizen’, and in turn ‘save’ democracy, through the traditional liberal enlightenment method of ‘education’. The discourse in which this truth is central is thus a *moral* one. Drawing on this long liberal tradition of ‘civics’ young people were chastised for poor civic behaviour, and emphasis was put on how the state could instil in them the virtue of ‘active citizenship’, much as Rousseau originally suggested educating the young *Èmile* and *Sophie* towards a virtuous and civic adulthood (Rousseau 1911).

These ‘facts’ and their translation into this ‘truth’ provided the impetus for research into young people’s deficiencies as well as into the best and appropriate educational remedies. Initially research tended to support the dominant discourse. For example, McAllister (1998) concentrated on testing political knowledge, and concluded that young Australians were one of the least knowledgeable groups in Australian society, possessing disturbingly low levels of political literacy. Lean also took up the issue of apathy, aiming to find ‘whether Australian youth as a group is apathetic and negative towards politics and politicians’ (Lean 1996: 52). Her finding that young people were largely uninterested generally supported the dominant discourse. The largest study to date, the ARC funded Youth Electoral Study, which ran between 2003 and 2006, was designed to find out why many young Australians neglected their duties as voting

citizens, despite the compulsion to vote in Australia. As well as identifying the characteristics of those not enrolled to vote the study, borrowing the language of the SSCEET policy papers, aimed to develop interventions to engage young Australians to become active, democratic citizens (YES 2003).

Whilst the dominant discourse remains entrenched within the policy literature, however, the academic debate has moved on from these earlier positions, and has taken up positions of *resistance*. Many recent studies have challenged and ‘resisted’ the constructed ‘truth’ of the young ‘deficient’ citizen in the dominant discourse. Of interest here is the *way* that resistant discourses have been framed and how they operate. Most scholarly works, like this paper, taking ‘resistant’ positions, tend to follow a particular formula. They begin with empirical accounts of young people’s participatory disassociation, followed by the positioning of this within dominant discourses, a review also of other resistant discourses and then a discussion of the authors’ own research and conclusions. Put simply these resistant positions acknowledge the position they are resisting, and frame themselves in response to it. Beyond this, however, they are by no means homogenous, after dissection of young people’s attitudes, behaviour or voices, each makes a case for naming the way or ways that young people exhibit participatory behaviour.

A number of ‘positions’ have emerged in this literature. First, commentators have criticised the narrow and normative definition of participation that frames the dominant ‘deficit’ discourse. Frequently this hinges on a critique of the quantitative and ‘researcher led’ methodologies used in such studies where emphasis is placed on statistical studies of unreflexive and normative ‘political acts’, such as voting or membership of political parties. Vromen, examining the participatory citizenship of Generation X’ers, argues that, ‘much of the existing literature on Australian young

people's engagement with politics can be criticised for its lack of relevance in accounting for how young people actually practice participation' (Vromen 2003: 80). Vromen argues that examined across a range of participatory acts, not restricted to ones usually tested for by researchers, young Australians can be considered participatory. Vromen included acts such as boycotting, volunteering, donating money and union membership in her conceptual framework of participation. Similarly Fyfe (2009) argues that 'since the 1960s the functional definitions of political participation have continued to showcase conventional politics, in particular electoral voting, as the primary means of engagement' (Fyfe 2009: 43). He makes a case, instead, for understanding 'young people's distinct experience' (Fyfe 2009: 44).

A second common response goes beyond the 'non-normative' hypothesis to argue that not only are young people participating in politics, but that they are doing so in new, 'youth-led' ways. This response also challenges the methodological approaches of the studies that find disassociation and apathy, and frequently also incorporates some consideration of the way that the political realm itself has changed (Inglehart 1990). In an engaging account of young people's on-line activities Thomas (2007), for example, points to internet communities where young people participate and learn political skills that translate to the world offline as evidence of participatory behaviour. Collin (2007) makes a case for the necessity of new forms of political engagement in a modern political and policy culture where the state is decentered. Through a study of young Australians engaged in a largely on-line political community Collin shows the growing prevalence of participation through 'making the everyday'.

A third, minority, tendency is to argue that (often in addition to less normative or more 'youth led' ways) young people do, in fact, participate in politics in normative

contexts. Edwards, (2005) discussing research with young Australians regarding political participation, particularly through voting, found similar. Participants in this study were able to name a political issue that interested them. Whilst many were ambivalent about voting, frequently referring to ‘fines’ as a motivation for enrolling and voting, most also supported the ideal of democracy. Significantly many called for greater degrees of democracy, ones that were more representative and even more frequent (Edwards 2005).

Whilst each of the studies described and cited above adds unique and valuable insights to knowledge about young people’s political participation they are also framed by the dominant discourse and the ‘truth’ that this discourse has constructed. A commonality between the dominant and its challenging discourses is the view that youth political participation is a ‘good’, both for young people and for political communities. At issue is not this *good* of political participation, but instead *whether* young people participate, and, if so, *how*. This is not to suggest the converse, that participation is not a ‘good’, but only to highlight that the way that ‘the literature’ has been framed has set this up as the referent, and young people are ‘judged’ as ‘non-participatory’ or ‘participatory’ according to evidence found to support each position. This is the framing power of the dominant discourse. The power of the dominant discourse is also demonstrated in its capacity to set the terms of the debate, and to protect itself and the structures that underlie it from being scrutinised or contested. In the case of young people’s participation as constructed by the dominant discourse this is evident in the valorising of Australia’s democracy, and the positioning of youth as a threat to this.

The dominant discourse itself requires interrogation, as does its hidden referent ‘the *good*’ of participation. This discourse is organised around both ‘risk’ and a ‘moral

panic'. The dangers of both these organising tendencies are well recognised within the sociological literature on youth (see for example Cieslik and Pollack 2002). In the context of political participation young people are seen as 'risky' because of their perceived, or statistically evident, tendency to eschew political participation, which, in turn, is considered a harbinger of potential civil disruption (i.e. a 'moral panic'). Designating particular behaviours as 'risky', and 'dangerous', provides a way in to surveillance and control, and indeed this dominant discourse sets in terms measures (such as Civics and Citizenship Education) designed to mitigate this risk by 'disciplining' correct civic behaviours in young people. This is particularly evident in the Australian context where the desirable 'active citizen' was one who participated not only in normative ways, but ways supportive of the state and of governments. Thus, in responding to the dominant discourse of youth participation most energy has been expended on *showing that young people are not risky*, and *not a danger* or in other words demonstrating that they *do* participate. The power of the dominant discourse is that within this context its power to set the terms of the debate remains unchallenged. Put another way most energy has been expended, and ink spilled, in countering 'risk' and the threat of a 'moral panic', and defending the good behaviour of young people, rather than on challenging the terms of the debate. There has thus been less emphasis on asking questions about the nature of participation, representation or democracy itself. The debate about young people's political participation has operated in a way that has deflected attention from these crucial themes (although they are ever present beneath the surface) by making young people's participation in politics a *moral* issue about panic and risk where young people are either accused, or, in response, defended.

Given the evidence above it is my contention that different questions need to be asked about youth participation. The focus of this paper was to make a case for the asking of these different questions, the nature of these questions is a different enquiry. However, it is possible to make a brief start here. The question I pose as a starting point for future enquiries, is ‘what is the *telos* of youth participation for young people?’ ‘Telos’, a term most frequently associated with Aristotle, in its most simple sense, means a study of goals and purposes. In this context I am suggesting that focus be put not on describing how young people participate civically or politically, but instead on what they can *gain* from participating in politics, in normative, non-normative, or ‘youth-led’ contexts. Here I argue that the central focus should be on possibilities for power or efficacy in the context of a state that has been criticised for marginalizing young people (Bessant 2004), and also for in its current neoliberal manifestation for silencing the ‘power of the people’ more generally (Hamilton and Maddison eds 2007).

In this context researchers still need to challenge normative conceptions of what political participation is, and they need also to include young people’s voices in terms of understanding participation. However it is my contention that as well as enabling young people with the capacity to ‘speak’ of politics, participation, citizenship, and in ways that allow them to do so in their own voices, it is time to turn attention to this state. Again the term ‘*telos*’ can provide an in-road here. Not only is it important to consider what the purpose of participating may be for young people, it is also important to understand how the state has constructed young people as citizens, the capacity it allows them for participation, and, importantly how this capacity translates into real empowerment. A focus on young people and their behaviour, as is the current project of policy and research, can detract from an examination of the state, its

part in constructing not only the discourse of youth participation, but also the deficit youth of the dominant discourse itself. A lack of focus on the state also fails to highlight where this state demands democratic participation from young people in a context where broader democratic institutions and processes are lacking – in other words young people become a scapegoat that protects non-democratic state processes from scrutiny.

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