

CONTESTED ENGAGEMENTS: YOUTH AND THE POLITICS OF CITIZENSHIP

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Abstract:

In this paper, we present a framework for exploring how youth perform their citizenship through political engagements. The framework we propose provides a way to explore the agency of youthful citizens as imagined by different agents and the ways that youth understand their performances as citizenship. Using interviews with university students and administrators at six universities in Manchester and Glasgow, we highlight a distinction between agency and the performance of political acts in the production of citizenship of different forms, and the implications of this distinction for the development of autonomous citizens.

Keywords: youth, citizenship, agency, performance, autonomy

“People long in our history have gone to marches and held banners and made protests and made speeches and that’s part of our democracy. That is right. What is not right and not part of our democracy is that sort of violence and lawbreaking. It’s not right. It’s not acceptable and I hope that the full force of the law will be used.”

David Cameron, 15 December 2010
in Moore-Bridger, et al, 2010

British Prime Minister David Cameron was speaking after a massive protest in London against the cuts his government imposed on secondary and higher education and the imposition of fees up to £9000 year on university students. The protests drew thousands of students, some from universities and some from high schools and further education institutions. The youth were united in their anger at the cuts and in what they perceived to be the injustice of the government’s plans. The student unions of universities organised coaches to transport students, and thousands of other young people made their own way to the protests. The protests were loud, raucous, but mostly peaceful. In some cases protesters occupied buildings (in London and elsewhere) in acts of civil

disobedience. In a few, but highly publicised occasions, youth engaged in violence and vandalism. They broke into the Conservative Party headquarters in London, and in an almost surreal moment, attacked the Rolls Royce carrying Prince Charles and the Duchess of Cornwall to a gala that, inexplicably, drove onto the street the most radical protesters had occupied.

Tensions had mounted throughout the day, in part because of student anger, but also because the police formed a human barrier to contain people, known as a kettle. They refused to allow students to disperse or to leave the kettle for several hours, meaning students could not get access to food, liquids, toilets, or medical attention. In addition to university students, young school children were trapped in the kettle. What had started as a large, but peaceful demonstration became ominous, threatening, and dangerous for the people in the kettle.

After the crowds were finally allowed to disperse and the youth occupying the Conservative Party headquarters were dislodged and arrested, politicians and government officials bemoaned the violence of the protesters, arguing they had abrogated their rights to speech and assembly by their irresponsible, uncivil behaviour. Youth were admonished to leave the streets, to take their punishment, and to pursue their goals through legitimate means. The actions of a few hundred demonstrators seemed to silence the claims of nearly 100,000 other demonstrators. Students, however, asserted they were merely exercising their rights and responsibilities as citizens. Clearly, different ideas about citizenship were operative in these exchanges.

In this paper, we present a framework for exploring efforts to mould – and even control – citizenship for youth and how youth perform their citizenship through political engagements. Youth are often imagined as both the solution to societies' ills and the greatest threat to the social order. As such, considerable effort is devoted to cultivating citizens who will engage in behaviours seen as 'legitimate' or appropriate. Our focus is on universities, as they are key sites for these efforts, training as they do the youth who are perhaps best positioned to lead a country into the future. As we demonstrate, various institutions and organisations attempt to mould youth as 'active' citizens, who are engaged in their communities and in civil society but who will not fundamentally challenge the state or the normative social order. The framework we propose provides a

way to explore the agency of youthful citizens as imagined by different agents and the ways that youth understand their performance of citizenship and the political implications of their acts. Specifically, we use the framework to highlight contested meanings of citizenship and the kinds of activities in which citizens should and do engage. The framework we develop is animated through interviews conducted with university administrators and students in Manchester and Glasgow.

Youth, Citizenship and Engagement

The goal of British citizenship education initiatives is the creation of young citizens who know what is expected of them and who are engaged with their communities and country (Pykett, 2009). This approach to youth and citizenship is replicated in other countries, by both governments and international organisations (e.g., Skelton, 2007; Staeheli and Hammett, 2010). Indeed, a veritable industrial sector of NGOs has emerged that promotes this view of citizenship and disseminates ‘best practice’ for encouraging responsible citizens who are actively engaged in civil society. Youth are favoured targets for these programmes, with the idea that they are at an age at which they can understand the requirements of citizenship and at which the practices of citizenship can be instilled. Yet youth do not simply receive and act upon their lessons in citizenship, but instead work with that information, compare it with other lessons and what they observe around them, and adapt it to meet the challenges and experiences of daily life. The paradox of efforts to develop responsible citizens that work in support of government and community is that youth will also develop the skills to challenge them both. The politics of an engaged citizenry, then, are not foreordained, but instead emerge through contestation. In this section of the paper, we outline the paradox inherent in efforts to train citizens and then explore the manifestations of that paradox in the nature of engagement for young citizens.

Youth, Autonomy, and Citizenship

Youth are often in an ambiguous position with respect to the state and civil society, as recent scholarship has demonstrated (Gaskell, 2008; Skelton, 2010; Kallio and Häkli, 2011). From some theoretical perspectives, the very status of youth as political subjects and as citizens is questioned on the grounds of youths’ autonomy, or perhaps

their *lack* of autonomy. Those youth who are under the age of majority often lack access to the full range of rights associated with citizenship in a given country, such as the ability to vote, to run for office, or to enter into contracts with the state without the agreement of guardians. Whether viewed from the perspective of liberal theory (in which youth may be constructed as incapable of participating in their own governance due to a moral compass and rationality that is not fully developed) or from post-foundational and governmentality perspectives (that may emphasize the presumed inability to care for and govern the self), youth are often understood as not being fully formed as autonomous citizens. In governmentality scholarship, the malleability associated with the incompleteness of youths' autonomy justifies intervention by a state to encourage (and perhaps enforce) self-limitation and self-governance on the part of individuals, such that they perform the state's goals without questioning or reflecting on their role (see Pykett, et al., 2010; Jones, et al 2011). Whether through the operation of democratically enacted laws or through the internalisation of norms, the 'autonomous' citizen is one whose actions are thereby limited.

Yet the development of the citizen is constrained by the paradox inherent in autonomy itself. Rasmussen (2011) argues that the processes and relationships through which individuals learn to be self-regulating require that individuals learn to adapt to new situations that were not anticipated by state pedagogies. If an individual is to be truly self-regulating and self-limiting, the individual cannot simply be an automaton, but must instead be capable of assessing situations and formulating strategies for action. The creativity that is required to enable that response also introduces uncertainty and the possibility that subjects will imagine and enact responses that may contravene or challenge the public order. In other words, the development of the self-governing political subject requires the development of creativity that holds the potential to act in ways that may challenge, rather than reinforce, the state and social order. Efforts to foster citizenship amongst youth traverse these contradictions of autonomy.

Regulations that focus on behaviours associated with civility, for instance, encourage behaviours associated with responsible citizenship in civil society (Bannister, et al., 2006; Gaskell 2008). Implicit in these regulations is an argument that civil behaviour is a requirement for inclusion in the public realm, while uncivil behaviour requires the expulsion from citizenship. As Boyd (2006) argues, and as David Cameron

seems to affirm, the message is that *civil rights* are conditioned on *civility* in *civil society*. These regulations contribute to the development of self-regulated citizens by encouraging behaviours in the first instance, rather than simply proscribing certain behaviours (Jones, et al 2011). Certain groups may be most in need of this encouragement, including youth who need to develop their ability to self-regulate. Ranciere (2008: 28) uses youth – or perhaps youthfulness – as a metaphor for all unregulated behaviour, arguing that “...politics in its entirety is accounted for by an anthropology that knows but one opposition: that between an adult humanity faithful to tradition, which it institutes as such, and a childish humanity whose dream of engendering itself anew leads to self-destruction.” He continues that the question motivating the School – the institutions and practices that regulate behaviour – is about “the process of transmitting knowledge that has to be saved from the self-destructive tendency being born in democratic society” (2008: 29). He argues that a host of institutions – what he calls ‘the School’ – is focused on limiting unregulated behaviour, rather than on fostering autonomous political subjects and citizens. Other scholars focused on education systems and youth transitions make similar arguments, albeit cast in terms of ‘civic character’ and without the rhetorical flourishes (e.g., Berkowitz, et al., 2008)

Universities, Citizenship and Engagement

Of particular concern to us is the way this regulation occurs – and is contested – in universities and the kinds of publics that are fostered in them. Historically, a liberal university education – in which students learn philosophy, languages, arts, and science – was imagined as providing a knowledge base, a sense of commonality, and a shared approach to problem solving that was necessary for democratic citizens to effectively participate in deliberation about the problems facing society (Shklar, 1998; Justice, 2008). Never available to all young people, access to university education has nevertheless expanded in many countries, often justified and promoted in terms of the need to consolidate a national community capable of democratic governance (e.g., Rhoten and Calhoun, 2011; Watson, et al, 2011). At the same time, higher education has also tended to shift from a liberal education to more technical, specialised, and skills-based training for neoliberal citizens. Critics argue that the emphasis is now on university education as preparation for employment, as compared to broader competence in a democratic public

realm (e.g., Evans, 1995; Castree, 2000; Fish, 2008). The role of the higher education with regard to the preparation of democratic citizens is thus contested.

In many respects, this is nothing new, as universities have rarely been neutral sites of learning and scholarship. Indeed, the expectations that an institution could impart values of rationality and train the future leaders of society imply a particular political vision of the relationship between the university and the places in which they are situated. Very often, intellectuals imagined that their work would be useful in exposing the value-laden nature of putatively universal or impartial knowledge, and in so doing, provide the tools to address inequality and injustice (for critique, see Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990; Harding, 1991). In some instances, this political vision resulted in direct intervention in communities. In the United Kingdom, for example, universities involved in the Settlement House Movement built houses in impoverished neighbourhoods. Students often lived in these houses along with poor people from the area; both groups were offered education and social and cultural enrichment as a means of addressing social exclusion. The houses themselves were often sites of innovative social practice and policies, even as they attempted to impart a particular social vision in the students and youth (Trolander 1987; Spain 2001). Thus, there is a long – if contested – history of universities attempting to foster engagement between their students and the societies in which they live.

Yet universities are also sites where young people often become politicised and begin to question the values and norms imparted by their parents, explore new ideas, and use their critical thinking skills to challenge, rather than reproduce their communities. This often results in criticisms that universities foster a culture of radicalism in which the status quo is disrupted and in which rewards are distributed (in the form of recognition for students and academic staff alike) for engaging in political action that may have little to do with learning or scholarship (Fish, 2008). That individuals who are developing their sense of identity and political subjectivity are exposed to such politicking and activism is often bemoaned, as though young people are easily manipulated by the political views of their professors (e.g., ACTA, 2006). The result has been a raft of programmes intended to foster ‘appropriate’ engagements with communities and the broader world. Sometimes these programmes are funded by central governments. The Peace Corps in the United States, for instance, is funded by the US State Department

and trains volunteers to work in marginalised communities throughout the world. Imagined as training ‘democracy’s missionaries’ when it was established, recent graduates from universities were the primary group that recruiters targeted (Hoffman, 1998). Service learning programmes are more often funded by universities themselves, as are volunteer placements in the local community. Such programmes are often promoted as fostering active citizenship and engagement in civil society in ways that inculcate responsible behaviour (Collins, 2010). While some proponents point to the ways that youth learn to be good citizens and good ambassadors for the university, others question the kinds of courses linked with service learning and voluntarism; they point to the leftist politics of the people and organisations involved, and argue that the programmes subsequently lead to radicalism (Horowitz and Laksin, 2009). The potential for politicising youth through these programmes – whether real or assumed – also demonstrates the paradox of autonomy, whereby the subject developed through university education and who is capable of making decisions so as to be self-governing also has the ability to imagine a different future or set of possibilities and learns the skills to disrupt the dominant order. In other words, education for citizenship does not necessarily lead to ‘good’ citizens or foreclose the possibility of citizens who act in opposition to the state.

Citizenship, Agency and Performance

A host of agents and institutions attempt to shape the ways in which students engage with the issues and world around them. Public funding agencies, political pressure groups, governments, community members, universities and youth themselves all exert influences on the ways that young people navigate the paradox of autonomy described above. Many of these efforts implicitly promote a form of citizenship described as ‘active’, in which youth engage in their communities to learn citizenship skills and to address social problems. These active citizenship programmes may be part of a broad set of efforts to ‘responsibilize’ citizens such that they regulate their own behaviour and reduce the need for state intervention in communities (Jones, et al, 2011; Davies, 2012). Youth, however, often engage with their worlds in ways that might be described in terms of ‘activist citizenship’ (Isin, 2009) such that they challenge the status quo as part of a broader effort to undermine it. While these two forms of citizenship may seem distinct, we argue they may be entwined; to understand these relationships, we need to consider the agency of youth and their performance of politics.

Active and Activist Citizenship

Embedded in many engagement initiatives is a vision of youth as knowledgeable, practical and engaged in making their communities, cities and countries better. It is an appealing view of youth and their potential as citizens: it harnesses the enthusiasm and spirit of youth, their fresh view on old problems, and their ability to envision and act upon long-standing issues. But in promoting engagement of youth as active citizens, these initiatives also attempt to instil social norms and expectations within which youth limit their behaviours and political visions accordingly (Hammett and Staeheli, 2011). In promoting active citizenship, optimism regarding youth is often coupled with an instrumental logic that imagines youth who can be moulded into agents capable of engaging with social problems without challenging the structures and relationships that underlie them. This may be evident in engagement programmes wherein students are channelled into particular kinds of activities that pose few challenges to the status quo; programmes of this sort include volunteer opportunities for community projects or good neighbour programmes where students pick up litter and get to know their non-student neighbours. Leadership programmes promote other forms of engagement that provide skills, experiences, and work placements that students can list on their resumes for future employment; such programmes promote a view of citizenship in which self-sufficiency and engagement are merged in ways that justify a reduced role for the state in supporting 'responsible' citizens (see Staeheli, 2012).

If active citizenship is deployed to address social issues without fundamentally challenging their causes, activist citizenship has a goal of challenging and perhaps transforming the status quo. And here the word 'goal' is important, because there may be many strategies in working toward that goal and because success may be less important than the effort. For Isin (2009), it entails acts that break with the everyday, and making new political forms. This is possible because youth engage with civil society and the state in ways over which universities or other institutions may have little control. In these engagements, youth express themselves as political agents who are capable of challenging both their universities (e.g., occupation of buildings, disrupting meetings) or the government and society on broader issues (e.g., protests against austerity or against war). Furthermore, the paradox of autonomy means that skills learned in one form of engagement may be transferred to other engagements. For example, the organisational

skills learned in volunteering in a university-sponsored project may be equally useful in a campaign to organise the occupation of a university building. In other words, understanding the agency of youth as they engage with social issues and communities is critical in the kind of citizenship that is produced, or at least attempted.

Agency

As already argued, the autonomous citizen is idealised as one who is capable of acting freely. Yet the ability to act in ways that are consonant with particular norms of citizenship is inculcated through processes of socialisation such that ‘appropriate’ behaviours are internalised. In so doing, the agency of citizens is shaped, and perhaps constrained. Active citizenship programmes, for instance, may emphasise voluntarism, but there is often an element of coercion, as some universities require students to do ‘community service’, either as a degree requirement or if they are found to violate codes of behaviour. And coercion may also be used to dissuade students from certain kinds of engagement, such as activities that might bring the university into disrepute. On their part, students may exhibit a range of attitudes and may be more or less influenced by what university administrations wish to achieve. As has been argued above, even as youth inculcate norms and behaviours associated with self-governance, they also bring experiences and values from beyond the university and engage creatively with their worlds. Far from being completely controlled by either the university or the broader society, then, their engagements can be conceptualised as comprised by acts aligned on a continuum of circumscribed to empowered agency (see Figure 1).

----- Figure 1 about here -----

Performance of Politics

Conceptualising engagement through acts that are variously limited or empowered, however, does not offer a means to read either the political intentions or political implications of an act. Furthermore, even when there may seem to be constraints on engagements, youth may subvert those constraints either intentionally or as an unintended consequence of their actions. Even more importantly, the politics of engagement and action can be read differently by various people and at different times. For example, some student organisations in the US have sponsored ‘Affirmative Action Bake Sales’ in which white males are charged a higher price for baked goods than are students of colour and women students. The students sponsoring the sale use the event

to highlight what they consider to be the injustice of affirmative action and attempt to challenge what they see as the status quo. Interpreting the kind of citizenship promoted in this context may be difficult. While some might argue that it represents a break with the status quo, others take a different stance, perhaps pointing to the ways in which the political vision and agency of the organisers may actually reinforce dominant hierarchies in American society by calling into question the legitimacy of a redistributive policy. In other words, the politics of engagement can be thought of as a performance that can be interpreted – and perhaps variously interpreted – as compliance with or dissent from the dominant social norms, expectations and orders. As before, compliance and dissent may be two points aligned on a continuum of political performances (Figure 2).

----- Figure 2 about here -----

It might be tempting to assume that circumscribed agency would almost necessarily lead to political acts that comply with the status quo or social norms, and so the continua would either be parallel or collapse onto each other. This is not necessarily the case, however, particularly if one remains open to the possibilities of different interpretations, to unintended consequences or meanings of acts, or of an act taking different implications over time, as with the bake sales described above. Instead, putting the two dimensions into a relationship with each other without collapsing them highlights the ways in which youth may enact contrarian politics that surprise, challenge and subvert the efforts to create the self-governing and self-limiting citizen (Figure 3). Without really believing the two dimensions are orthogonal, we can use the relationship between them to think about the ways that citizenship is created through the engagements of citizens whose status as ‘active’ or ‘activist’ is ambiguous. In using this figure, we do not intend to ‘fix’ an act in a particular quadrant or location; instead, we use it to consider the implications of agency, the performance or politics, and the ways that different actors interpret the citizenship that is made through political engagements.

----- Figure 3 here -----

The remainder of the paper illustrates this argument through an analysis of different forms of engagement described by students and administrators at six universities in Manchester and Glasgow. In so doing, we demonstrate the complex ways in which agency and performance are combined and contested to produce different

forms of citizenship. We interviewed 19 students and administrators in 2010 to understand the kinds of community and civic engagement activities they offered, the goals of their programmes, the reasons the universities supported them, and how the students used them. Most of the respondents waived their rights to confidentiality, but some students mentioned acts that could be used against them. We have therefore not used the names of any respondents or universities.

Agency and the Performance of Engagement and Citizenship in UK Universities

The structure of the British higher educational system has undergone dramatic changes since World War II. Initially only available to elites, access to universities widened in the post-war period as part of sweeping changes to the welfare state. Local councils paid the fees and provided a maintenance grant for students who were admitted to universities; as more students were admitted based on their academic abilities, the costs became prohibitive. In 1998, the maintenance grants were replaced with loans, and the central government set limits on the number of students that could be enrolled by any university. Costs continued to rise, however, and in 2006 the government introduced ‘top up fees’ of up to £3000 to be paid by students in England and Wales¹, but that could be included in the student loans. In 2007, higher education was moved out of the Department of Education and into the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, and then in 2010 to the reorganised Department of Business, Innovation and Skills. These changes signalled a shift in both the responsibility for paying for higher education (from the government to individuals) and in the purpose of universities vis-à-vis business and economic development. In these changes, the government promoted a form of citizenship that fused economic self-sufficiency and a reduced role for the state in supporting citizens.

In 2010, the government announced further changes to the ways in which education was to be funded. The first involved increases in fees for university students and a concomitant reduction in support for courses in social sciences, arts and humanities; the result would allow annual government spending on university teaching to be reduced from £7.1bn in 2010 to £4.2bn in 2014 (Vasagar, 2010). While it was intended that universities could only charge the higher fees if they undertook significant and measurable steps to broaden access to university education to marginalised an under-

represented communities, nearly two-thirds of universities in England and Wales were allowed to charge the full £9000 annual fee, and all universities would charge at least £6000 (*The Guardian*, 2011).

At the same time the decisions about fees were made, universities in Scotland and England were directed to emphasise ‘employability’; this was accompanied by increased corporate presence in universities through sponsorship of studentships, buildings, seminars and events. Most students were, of course, interested in gaining access to employers and employment, but some were also concerned about the kinds of companies that were present in the university. Corporations stamped their brands on the spaces of universities, and in some cases, spaces for student organising were taken away to accommodate these new initiatives. Many students – particularly in Scotland, where they did not pay fees – interpreted these shifts as bringing a corporate and neoliberal outlook to universities that compromised their social missions and muffled their politics. The protests sparked by these changes represented an attempt by students to perform their politics; they provide a lens into the contrasting ways in which engagement was undertaken and that youth’s citizenship was performed and interpreted.

Engagement and the Promotion of Active Citizenship

While student anger built over changes to education policy and the effects of austerity, engagement programmes were put in place to demonstrate university commitments to the broader society. Administrators we interviewed were keen to show how their university engaged with governmental and statutory organisations, such as the local government councils or with quangos. Community engagement activities typically focused on building relationships with the surrounding area and voluntary organisations. Both kinds of activities tended to be organised from the centre and were folded into university marketing. When students were included or participated, they were channelled into particular activities, often in support of university goals of promoting the ‘brand’ and active citizenship. Using the framework introduced previously, these efforts often represented attempts to direct student agency in the performance of acts that complied with social norms and expectations, even as they may represent efforts at addressing injustice or inequality.

For example, one university in Glasgow had a strong social mission from its founding in the late 1800s. It has taken that social mission and built it into the branding of the university, which an upper-level administrator noted was important because “we all must get better at differentiating ourselves from the university next door.” Indeed, his responsibilities were for marketing and development. One of the high-profile programmes he mentioned is intended to “turn hopelessness into hope” in one of the most deprived areas of the city by sending university students from the area to work in local schools. This was important, he said, because:

“There has been a tradition of middle-class do-gooders going in to help the poor, and that can backfire in this kind of community engagement stuff.... It’s wonderful if people want to help and volunteer. But it just makes so much more sense to us if the student knows the streets, knows the families, knows the people, speaks the same language” (G01, 18 October 2011).

So they hired students to work in schools in the most deprived area the city to help improve secondary school children’s chances of success and, by example, to encourage the best of those children to apply not just to any university, but to *their* university. Altruism, commitment to the common weal, and marketing worked hand-in-hand in the administrator’s mind. But what of the university students who worked in this project? Coming from the neighbourhoods in which the project was focused, they themselves lacked resources and needed employment. Perhaps because of this, there was little room for students’ agency; they were instead directed to certain activities as employees of the university.

University administrations also recognised the social impact of the universities on the surrounding neighbourhoods and used community engagement and volunteer programmes to build better relationships and to demonstrate the benefits of the universities. They hoped that if residents saw students doing neighbourhood cleanups, there would be fewer complaints about students coming home in the wee hours of the morning. Similarly, they hoped that students who knew their non-student neighbours would be more respectful of them. For instance, one local council in Manchester received many complaints about immigrants from the Middle East and South Asia who did not use their garbage and recycling bins properly. The university students in that area

were, themselves, immigrants from those same regions, so the university decided to match students with non-student immigrants to explain the rules about rubbish collection and to translate other council documents. The university anticipated this would integrate the immigrant families into the area, make students better residents, and would demonstrate the value of the university to the area.

Most of the programmes supported by university administrations linked employability to active citizenship. The manager of a community engagement programme at university in Manchester, for example, explained that

“in terms of the volunteering, it’s very much about the employability of the students.... That doesn’t mean to say that the way we use student volunteering doesn’t impact on the community, it does. And it is very much about community engagement. But really, we want our students to build their CVs and be able to demonstrate something over and above what they’ve achieved while they’ve been with us, their academic achievements” (M15, 14 June 2011).

Reflecting this concern with employability, many other programmes labelled themselves as leadership programmes, rather than volunteer or service programmes. A university in Glasgow defined leadership in relation to volunteering, with the argument that the two were inextricable. The manager explained: “If you volunteer, that should demonstrate leadership” and “volunteering is the crucial way to show leadership.” The rationale offered by another programme director was as follows:

“If they’re having to make decisions in their future lives, they need to understand the broadness of society and all the people, and if we’re producing graduates who are going to be some to the top elites in the country, whether that’s at public institutions or of corporations, sitting on boards, leading their own companies, working for large charities in senior positions, they need to understand the implications of their actions and the decision-making.... If they’ve only come from a very, very narrow sector of society, the decision-making is only every going to reflect that” (M23, 21 June 2011).

In these comments, the social mission of the university is tinged with an expectation that students either are or will become elite members of society who will make decisions that affect marginalised communities. There is also an attitude that voluntarism is not a good on its own, but that it is part of making a good citizen who will lead others through their future employment.

Students were imagined by these administrators as being content to perform their citizenship within the confines of university-established programmes. Furthermore, these programmes encouraged particular kinds of activities that addressed the common weal, but did not pose challenges to the university, city, or broader society. Some of the university-run volunteer programmes, for instance, prioritised two or three projects each year that were relatively large and that fit within university priorities. In this way, student agency and engagement with the community was directed to university goals; they were also ‘safe’ goals, intended to show the contribution of the university to the community.

Despite the structured nature of participation offered through the programmes, students were often critical of these attempts to direct their agency and politics. One commented:

“We’ve got this mass commercialisation of university courses and this marketisation of education. Even things like leadership courses, it’s about driving people into careers and driving people into the working world. And so all these people who see it like that having a form of political engagement which really broadens and opens them up to seeing more injustice in the world, to question, well.... We talk a lot about privilege and how some students are more privileged than others. But to open your eyes to the level of injustice and to see how that functions in the society is incredibly important... It’s no wonder they [the university administration] want to stifle that, to turn students into just career sharks” (M04, 4 June 2011).

Such comments suggest that university goals may not have been fully inculcated by the students, and that the effects of such programmes may result in a more complicated politics of citizenship formation than the term ‘active citizenship’ suggests.

Programmes run by the student unions, for example, were somewhat different to the university programmes and seemed less constrained by university priorities, even when the programmes appear to be similar on the surface. In the UK, student unions are run by students and are not part of the university administrative structure; in the tradition of labour unions, they are separate from the university and often stand in opposition to it. Many of the programmes run by the unions were more open to student choice in the kinds of activities engaged and held more potential to challenge authority or the status quo. Using the terms we introduced previously, they suggested a kind of agency on the part of students that was less constrained and involved acts that offered the potential to express dissent. One student union, for instance, partnered with a homeless community centre to staff a soup kitchen two nights a week. The coordinator noted that students do not volunteer at this sort of activity just to get something on their CV, but are instead motivated to help other people whom society had overlooked. Another project worked directly with asylum seekers, and a third worked with a grassroots group attempting to bridge sectarian conflicts in the city. While these programmes might be homologous with the kinds of engagements associated with active citizenship, they were also more responsive to student concerns and put students into more direct contact with others than did most of the university-organised programmes. They may, therefore, represent a less constrained or channelled form of agency, even if the performance of citizenship looked similar to that of university-organised programmes.

Furthermore, the politics of university- and student-led programmes may be different, even when the performance of acts might look familiar. For example, many of the activities organised by the student unions were similar to those of the university administrations; both, for instance, sponsored good neighbour programmes. While the activities may be the same in this instance, what students intend through their performance of politics may differ. One organisation sent students to community associations in low-income neighbourhoods near the university; students attend community meetings and have a small pot of money to help start projects that link the university students and communities. On the surface, these projects look very much like the kinds organised by university administrations, but they are unconstrained by university rules and efforts to protect their 'brands' as students worked with the communities on political projects that challenged the government. Furthermore, few

universities sponsor student efforts to work with asylum seekers or homeless people without the involvement of academic or university staff, in part because such work often puts students in an ambiguous position with respect to legal authorities that may compromise the universities' duty of care to students. In the absence of university involvement, one student-organised group engaged in civil disobedience to protect asylum seekers, and authorities forcibly removed the soup kitchen mentioned previously; in both cases, students faced the possibility of danger that university programmes would probably not have tolerated. And many students participate in projects without any connection to the university. As the volunteer coordinator for a student union observed, "I think the politicized students have tended to stick with [occupations of university buildings] and that sort of thing, and other students have gone to volunteering" (G05, 20 October 2011). She continued, however, saying that politicized students "probably find their own outlets for volunteering"; presumably they were outlets that had a more explicitly oppositional politics. Thus these examples make clear several important points: the ways in which agency may be circumscribed in engagement activities that are organised by universities as compared to students; the differences *between* students in terms of how engagement is practiced; and that the performance of what appear to be similar activities may carry different politics. Universities may intend to promote active citizenship, but what students do with what they learn may be something else entirely.

Engagement and Activist Forms of Citizenship?

The winter of 2010 and spring of 2011 witnessed an efflorescence of student protest that some dubbed the 'student spring,' not just in the UK, but in countries around the world, and protests have merged with other movements against austerity, war, environmental and social injustice, and inequality. While universities typically do not think of these protests as 'engagement' and certainly do not encourage them, we use the term in recognition that engagements can be of many forms and carry different political implications that are not easily – or even appropriately – captured in the idea of active citizenship. They suggest instead a different politics of citizenship in which activism plays a more prominent role than, for example, leadership or employability. As in the work with asylum seekers and the soup kitchen, students often perform acts that seem consistent with active citizenship, but do so in ways that reflect a less constrained sense of agency and a politics that dissents from the status quo.

Consider some of the acts of engagement that were organised by students at the universities where we conducted our research. Unions organised against cuts through protests and civil disobedience against their universities; they also paid for coaches to take students to larger protests in London. Some students protested the marketisation of university education. A group of particularly entrepreneurial students tried to sell their university vice chancellor's car on e-Bay; they advertised the sale, saying that the vice chancellor would donate proceed of the sale to students (M10, 8 June 2011). Another student group surrounded a vice chancellor's car as he attempted to leave, and effectively kettled him until 11pm. It was a humane kettle, however, as the students had pizza delivered to the car and offered to share with him. These kinds of activities drew attention, in part because of their humour, but the more established student groups were wary of them. A campaign director at a union noted that actions that intimidate staff or affected single individuals – no matter how high in the administration – ran the risk of alienating other administrative and academic staff members who were key allies for the students (M05, 3 June, 2011). In these contexts, even radical students were aware of the potential for backlash and limited their engagements accordingly.

For example, protest organisers debated the best routes for protests to gain maximum attention and to challenge the universities, governments and police. There were also debates between different student groups about the best strategies for gaining attention in different space: was it better to march to the town hall and wave banners or would it be more effective to engage in outreach through entertainment (e.g., clowning) in central plazas that would educate a broader citizenry? In these efforts, students were keenly aware of their legal rights, responsibilities and what they could get away with in each kind of space, as well as how their actions would be received. Clowning in a central plaza maintained by a Business Improvement District, for instance, could be disallowed if permission was requested in advance, but the BID would garner negative publicity if it attempted to push the clowns away and the clowns – and perhaps their political message – would be viewed more favourably. The debates about how and where to perform their political engagements, therefore, were recognition that the interpretation of acts was as important as the actual performance.

Perhaps the most notable spaces of engagement in recent years, however, have been the occupation of university buildings, and both Glasgow and Manchester

Universities witnessed high profile occupations. Glasgow's Free Heatherington campaign was the longest lasting, with students occupying the building for seven months. Through occupation, an alternative space was created that reached from the occupied space into the surrounding communities. And people from outside the university joined in support of the students and activists to the point it seemed that there may have been more non-students participating than students. Yet that was exactly the point for one:

"It was an activist space, a radical space, and I think that is intimidating for a lot of people going in. You don't know whether it's going to be a clique, and the minute you perceive a group of people who know each other you get really scared. If you've never seen radical stuff, you'll look at the walls and be like, 'Oh, my goodness. They're trying to have a revolution. It's so scary!'... I wasn't really politically active before. I'd done a bit of work with Student Action for Refugees², but that didn't seem very active to me. It seemed like we weren't really doing very much, not really offering practical support, whereas during the Heatherington, there were things on the walls and the leaflet table and people always coming in and saying what campaigns they were involved in. So being involved in that was really – I started being politically active and many people have. Certainly there's a lot more awareness on campus" (G23, 8 November 2011).

For this student, at least, the space was one that opened her view to a new world of more radical, activist engagements.

Yet occupation was controversial, even amongst students engaged in the occupation. Reflecting the debate about spatial strategies noted above, one Manchester activist felt that it would have been more effective to occupy the offices of Members of Parliament: "If we could have had those hundreds of people, because there were upwards of 200 people in the occupation, if we could have had all of those people outside an MP's office trying to reason with them, going out door-knocking, putting more pressure on them, getting more people involved, I think we would have had a better chance of changing the minds of MPs" (M10, 8 June 2011). Ultimately, a split emerged between student groups over the best ways to perform their politics, which a number of students found regrettable.

The extent to which students really could control their performances and engagements was a source of worry for some. As students reached into communities, there was a tension between education, outreach and responsiveness. Many of the students wanted to work with communities as part of social justice campaigns, but some had strong feelings about both the nature of the issues confronting marginalised communities and about the best ways to address them. In ‘educating’ the communities, students ran the risk of not listening to them, thereby reinforcing the students’ privilege. In other instances, building alliances with other groups sometimes meant that students felt their voices were not heard; this was a particular issue with regard to the Socialist Workers Party (SWP). Some university students thought the SWP was more interested in gaining attention and attracting new members than in addressing student concerns.

Even more worrying for the students, however, was the way that universities colluded with the government and police to control behaviours. This control was not simply exercised at protests and occupations, but was a kind of control over students’ futures. This was most notably effected through the use of ‘cautions.’ In England, police can issue a caution against a person if the police think the person is doing something on the verge of being illegal or that might escalate into an illegal act; in the context of a protest, the illegal act is most likely to be aggravated trespass. A caution is registered against the person, but no further action is taken by the police. But because there is no legal penalty associated with a caution and no illegal act needs to have been committed for a caution to be issued, they cannot be contested, even though they stay on a person’s record. The significance for the students is that they have been told that having a caution on their records means that they cannot enter certain professions, such as law, social work, teaching, or medicine. Prior to the protests in December, 2010, police worked in conjunction with universities to identify students who might attend protests, and sent letters to them explaining that cautions would be issued. Indeed, at the protests, police handed out cautions with what seemed to be abandon, leading one legal aid firm to accuse the police of criminalising a generation of students for expressing dissent (Shepherd, 2011). While students railed at the injustice of this, many were also unwilling to take the risk and so did not attend the protests they organised. The performances of politics conducted outwith the university, it seems, are nevertheless constrained to some degree, yielding uncertain possibilities for citizenship formation.

Contested Engagements

‘Engagement’ is a non-threatening word for what is really a hard-edged politics about citizenship formation. There are many efforts to shape youth as citizens, giving them opportunities, skills, and rewards for engaging in particular kinds of political acts. We have focused on universities as sites in which citizenship is developed because they are particularly *instructive* sites for understanding how the paradox of the autonomous citizen unfolds: even as youth are trained to engage as active citizens, they gain a vision and learn the skills to engage as activist citizens. Such efforts are contested at every turn, however, as universities (and other institutions) attempt to constrain the agency of youth through their ‘education’ (even as universities themselves are buffeted by political winds and torn between their missions of liberal education and more vocational training). Youth often challenge these efforts to mould them into active citizens, either directly, or through the performance of acts that only seem to conform to what is expected. The outcomes of the development of citizens are therefore indeterminate.

Though indeterminate, the dialectics through which these outcomes are formed are nonetheless analyzable. The framework presented in this paper – which points to the ways in which empowerment and constraint, compliance and dissidence intersect in the performance of particular political *acts* – helps make clear how and why actors slip along the continuum of active↔activist citizenship, often strategically through their performance of political action. Furthermore, the framework turns our attention to the institutions and social relations that shape, though never fully control, these continua. It thus has broader applicability beyond the university setting we have examined here for understanding contests over how political subjects are constituted and act as autonomous citizens. The state, after all, is pedagogical in all manner of arenas, and not just with respect to youth. Social welfare policies encourage particular kinds of behaviours and ‘train’ citizens by withholding benefits from those who do not follow perform normative behaviours, or by enforcing ‘community service’ requirements on those unable to secure paid employment; in both cases, policies are efforts to force individuals to perform their duties as ‘active’ citizens. At the same time, of course, the provision of welfare might provide the means for – might *empower*, if in circumscribed ways – recipients to engage in activist politics, as in the case of the United States in the 1960s when federal funds were dedicated to organizing welfare recipients so they could pressure and transform local power structures (Piven and Cloward, 1992). Furthermore, these pedagogies cut across different national governments, both through policy

transfers and through the work of international organisations that promote active citizenship in countries around the world (Basok and Ilcan, 2006), often with unanticipated consequences as when Tunisian vendor Muhammed Bouazizi's cousin, who was trained by Serbian activists who themselves were funded by the National Endowment for Democracy, publicized Bouazizi's self-immolation, sparking mass uprisings against repressive regimes, the results of which remain highly indeterminate (Dobson, 2012).

In efforts to mould citizenship, whether in universities or through international NGOs, the qualities of the citizenship that is produced are rarely addressed, and indeed, the performances associated with acts of engagement are sometimes dismissed as illegitimate, as in the comments by Prime Minister Cameron that open this paper. Efforts to shape citizenship are rarely presented as being constraints on agency – indeed service learning programs are more typically presented as modes of empowerment – and the performance of particular acts often masks their political meanings. Yet sometimes, as in protests against changes to the university system, training geared towards producing active but compliant citizens can provide the very foundation for the development of activist engagements that disrupt the status quo and the social order. Citizenship is continuously contested – and created – through acts of engagement.

Notes

¹ Under the devolved policies for university funding, students in Scotland do not pay fees.

² This is same group mentioned previously for which the university was wary of student involvement.

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Figure 1: Youth Agency



Figure 2: Performance of Politics



Figure 3: Agency and Performance of Citizenship

