Geographies of children and youth III: Alchemists of the revolution?

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Abstract
This report analyses recent geographical scholarship and young people’s protest around the world in 2010 and 2011 in order to challenge two central themes in literature on politics and civil society. First, I critically examine the idea that young people, especially unemployed youth, are engaged only in a type of romantic, ineffective politics. Second, I question the notion that ‘civil society’ – in the sense of deliberative, non-violent politics that acts as a positive check on state power – occurs principally through formal organizations representing a generalized public interest. In making these points I argue for a new approach to analysis of civil society in human geography – one that allows for political mobilization that is informal, non-local, and based upon particularistic identities such as religion and caste.

Keywords
Arab Spring, children, civil society, new ecologies of protest, revolution, youth

I Introduction
Travelling up through the hills of north India recently I came upon a roadblock. Thirty children had occupied the bridge crossing the valley’s major river. Cars, jeeps and lorries were backed up half a mile either side of the bridge. Our taxi driver – a squat man with a huge moustache – barked angrily at the queue, ‘Kya ho raha hain?’ (what’s happening?). Explanations were hurled back up the line across the cars’ roofs: ‘The children don’t like their maths teacher’, a woman on the roadside explained. ‘They want the District Magistrate (DM) to replace him’, a lorry driver told us. An hour later and the DM arrived. He strode across the bridge to meet the children, brandishing his wooden baton in a threatening manner. But the plaintive appeals of the children, their ingenuity in staging the roadblock, and something perhaps of the romance of the scene – water rushing under their feet as they painstakingly explained the inadequacy of their maths tutor – persuaded the DM to act. He grudgingly accepted the children’s demands and the line of traffic jerked back to life.

The past 12 months have furnished numerous other examples of young people – even children as young as eight – becoming involved in popular protest around the world. Every newspaper presents a kaleidoscope of rebellion, dissatisfaction and anger prosecuted in large part by young people, and sometimes with reference to the notion of ‘youth’ and ‘generation’.

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These protests point to the importance of a globally comparative analysis of the hardships suffered by contemporary children and youth. My first report provided a template. I identified some of the key factors shaping young people’s lives across a wide variety of settings: poor education, an inability to remain in formal education due to other pressures, and the widespread phenomenon of youth unemployment. Added to this list might be: police harassment, corruption, poor housing options and intergenerational tensions. I also argued that it would be useful to look at key moments of change, or ‘vital conjunctures’ (Johnson-Hanks, 2002), during which young people’s marginalized position becomes especially evident but when, paradoxically, new possibilities for action can also come to light – moments such as the year after leaving school or the period after migrating to a city.

Since I wrote my first progress report on these issues, geographers have become much more active in documenting the marginalization experienced by young people. Some studies concentrate on issues of access, young people’s unequal capacity to acquire a meaningful education (Hamnett and Butler, 2011), their restricted access to places of leisure and play (Pain et al., 2010), and patterns of volunteering marked by social inequality (Jones, 2011), for example. Other studies consider the spatial performance of discrimination, for example within high schools (Thomas, 2008), university (Fincher and Shaw, 2011; Hopkins, 2011) and neighbourhoods (Nayak, 2010; Potter et al., 2010). Still other studies have charted how powerful institutions denigrate or indoctrinate young people, often in subtle, embodied ways (Ansell, 2010; Porter et al., 2010). This includes new work on the state’s increasing concern with security – or ‘securitization’ – and the negative implications of such disciplinary drives on young people (see Hyndman, 2010).

In the second report I argued for the importance of understanding young people’s agency (Jeffrey, 2011). I drew attention to their purposeful, strategic efforts to resist dominant forces, their resourcefulness in contexts of constraint, and young people’s involvement in the reproduction or deepening of pernicious power structures: ‘negative agency’.

In this, the third and final paper, I want to pick up on themes of the second report and reflect upon how young people’s protest around the world in 2010 and 2011 challenges two central arguments in literature on oppositional politics (see also Sparke, 2008): the notion that young people, especially unemployed youth, are ineffective political actors, and the idea that resistance occurs principally through formal organizations representing a generalized public interest.

As in the previous reports I use the term ‘children’ to refer to 6–15-year-olds and ‘youth’ to refer to 16–30-year-olds. I employ the term ‘young people’ to refer to both children and youth together. These are categories of convenience; all of the terms – especially ‘youth’ – are problematic intellectually and politically (e.g. Jeffrey, 2010a). There is no straightforward experience of ‘childhood’ or ‘youth’ that marks the lives of the young people discussed in this paper. Whether people in different parts of the world use the terms ‘youth’ or ‘child’ at all is by no means clear. Suffice to say that people in their pre-teens, teens and twenties are on the frontline of processes of globalization; analysis of young people can illuminate a host of interesting issues in human geography around space, place, scale, education, work and the environment.

II Young people as effective political agents

The notion that young people, especially unemployed youth, are either wholly ‘useless’ or some type of dark threat to society is everywhere repeated in media reports, World Bank policy papers, and some academic studies. Such ideas can be traced in part to the notion of Marx and Engels (1978) that unemployed youth were
‘alchemists of the revolution’, a term they employed ironically to suggest ineffective forms of politics, which were somehow ‘adolescent’ in nature: moving too fast and too slow at the same time. Pierre Bourdieu (1984) was similarly dismissive, identifying youth as victims of unrealistic dreams and spurious and romantic fantasies of upheaval.

Karl Mannheim (1972 [1936]) provides an alternative view. He argued that each generation, because it has grown up in distinct historical conditions, has a type of ‘fresh contact’ with its surroundings. Mannheim was careful not to attribute to young people the quality of being revolutionary, but he was optimistic about the ability of children and youth in certain conditions to rethink dominant structures and change aspects of local and non-local society.

Holding Marx and Engels and Bourdieu, on the one hand, against Mannheim, on the other, provides a framework for analysis of youth mobilization. Are young people simply ineffective dreamers, in the Marxian mould? Or could they act as a type of generational force for change in the Mannheimian vision?

Recent geographical and anthropological studies point to some of the type of quixotic, idiosyncratic politics that Marx and Engels and Bourdieu imagine as the purview of young people, and of unemployed youth in particular. For example, Daniel Mains (2007) refers to youth in urban Ethiopia who spend long periods of the day ostentatiously ‘doing nothing’. My own research in north India provides examples of young people who have responded to poor job prospects through engaging in a type of lackadaisical retreat from politics. ‘Enough, we are doing nothing, waiting for our luck to change’, was a common refrain on the streets of provincial towns in Uttar Pradesh (Jeffrey, 2010b).

But set alongside this story must be the type of spectacle I encountered while travelling in Uttarakhand in north India: everyday and also sometimes long-term efforts by young people to alter local, national or international structures. Examples are legion, and can be drawn from both recent news sources and geographical work. The outpouring of youth frustration on the streets and squares of Europe, Asia, Africa and Latin America over 2010 and 2011 – a ‘volcano of rage’ (Rodenbeck, 2011) – is truly remarkable. In December 2010 an educated underemployed young man in Tunisia committed suicide in response to police harassment. This act triggered a wave of protests against the state culminating in the overthrow of the dictator Ben Ali. The Tunisian uprising in turn sparked further protests across the Middle East and North Africa, most notably in Egypt, where a partly youth-led movement used social media and direct protests to force the authoritarian leader Hosni Mubarak from power. These uprisings were not straightforwardly ‘youth’ mobilizations. They involved people of different ages and they had agendas that went far beyond the narrow interests of those in their pre-teens, teens and twenties. But young people were important in the Arab Spring.

More recently, there was fairly widespread urban unrest among young people in London in August 2011, sparked in the first instance by anger at the police. There have also been demonstrations in southern Europe, South Africa, Sri Lanka and Chile regarding the privatization of higher education. In addition, young people have played lead roles in the ‘Occupy’ movement, which has involved the establishment of urban camps in cities in Europe and the USA as well as in other places, such as the Philippines, Mexico and Japan. There are less directly related protests in which young people are prominent in India, where anti-corruption has provided the rallying call. Again, not all of these demonstrations were undertaken mainly by young people. But children and youth have been highly visible in recent mobilization around the world, often playing roles as facilitators, rabble rousers or intellectuals. Young people appear to be acting as true ‘alchemists of the revolution’, as they have done in the past.
Recent geographical work points in similar directions. Children and youth are centrally involved in a range of parliamentary-style debates in many countries, as the research of Kallio and Häkli (2011) in Finland suggests. Children and youth have sometimes played a role in lobbying high officials, as the research of Philo and Smith (2003) reveals. Young people are involved, too, in building new links with children and youth in other contexts – for example, through travelling to foreign countries to volunteer (see Jones, 2011), establishing communication online (e.g. Gardner, 2008) or engaging in forms of political protest that cross national boundaries (Juris and Pleyers, 2009). This scholarship demonstrates the ability of people in their pre-teens, teens and twenties to use their common identity as young people or as a ‘generation’ as a starting point for critique and action.

One of the more interesting examples of such mobilization among young people comes from the village of Tilonia in north India, a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO)-sponsored experiment in rural living. In Tilonia, a children’s parliament takes many key decisions on schooling, governance, and village affairs more broadly – with some significant results in terms of the effectiveness of school functioning and absence of corruption (see http://www.tilonia.com).

III New ecologies of protest

The form of youth politics does not always straightforwardly accord with mainstream notions of political resistance, however. Lenin (1992) depicts oppositional politics as proceeding through disciplined organizations that have strong leadership and a set programme of goals. Scholars of civil society make similar points. Hegel (1991) defined civil society as a sphere occurring between the family and state evident in the existence of institutions and organizations such as clubs and debating societies. For Hegel, civil society was founded on gesellschaft sociality: disinterested social relations conducted without reference to family, caste and creed – rather than gemeinschaft – affective forms of sociality founded on feelings of family spirit (see Tonnies, 1955).

Some collective action among children and young people does accord with this Hegelian notion of civil society. Askins and Pain (2011) argue that participatory art projects recently run in northeast England provided the grounds for young people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds to develop a sense of shared purpose. While not explicitly political in nature, such ‘contact zones’ (the authors’ term) may serve as a basis for civil society organizing in the Hegelian mould.

But the current upsurge in youth mobilization presents a challenge to these visions of how opposition – in the form of political movements or civil society – proceeds.

For example, some forms of youth-related civil society emerge not out of impersonal social relations (gesellschaft) but according to religious or other identitarian logics (gemeinschaft). Hammer (2011) argues that Tunisia’s transition to democracy has occurred in large part through the efforts of a mainly young population within a network of mosque organizations. In western Uttar Pradesh, low-caste young people often mobilize with reference to the idea of being ‘Dalit’ (low-caste) in order to achieve social objectives (Jeffrey, 2010b). Likewise, in the case of the London Citizens movement studied by Jane Wills (2011), young people sometimes came together to campaign for progressive change as part of religious organizations.

Wills’ example is particularly interesting because she shows how a form of civil society based upon gemeinschaft – the church group, for example – can morph into mobilization along gesellschaft lines, as when the group comes to work with people from organizations representing other faiths or community ties. In
a somewhat similar vein, political mobilization in Egypt between 1980 and 2011 moved to some extent from gemeinschaft to gesellschaft. Religious groups like the Muslim Brotherhood were able to capitalize on widespread grievances and recruit and mobilize large numbers of youth in the 1980s and 1990s. But following the state’s harsh persecution of Islamists in the 1990s, youth activists began to express their grievances through a new generation of protest movements open to all ideological backgrounds and to those without an explicit ideology. Youth mobilization can evolve in the opposite direction, too. For example, in Egypt the Muslim Brotherhood intensified its efforts to enrol children and youth in its organization in 2011, employing a sophisticated system of recruitment (see Trager, 2011). The key point remains, however: particularistic loyalties can provide a basis for ‘civil society’ in the sense of deliberative, fairly democratic mobilization that acts as a positive check on state power.

Another prominent theme of emerging journalistic and academic comment on the Arab Spring is that of the capacity of young people within countries to mobilize across local and regional boundaries, especially via the web. Selim Shahine (2011) refers to the crucial role played by self-styled ‘internet youth’ in the coordination of protests in Egypt in January and February 2011. Hirschkind (2011) argues that these young people were able to create a new type of political language that could connect people across geographical boundaries. Others have focused on the capacity of young people to borrow ideas and tactics across national boundaries via the internet. Rodenbeck (2011) describes youth activists in different parts of North Africa and the Middle East sharing stories of their protests and providing moral support online. The Occupy movement provides a still more vivid example of how a network of protest sites can be practically and imaginatively linked through new technologies to increase the reach, effectiveness and plasticity of protest in which young people are prominent.

Scholars analysing earlier, anti-globalization protests make similar points (e.g. Juris and Pleyers, 2009). Geographers have highlighted the reciprocal relation between web-based communication and specific ‘local’ performances of civil action. Pløger (2010) uses a study of the civil liberties youth-led group Pirate Party to show that youth mobilization often involves both canny use of the media and an ability to orchestrate specific ‘presence-events’: visceral encounters ‘on the street’, for example, that can then be broadcast to a wide variety of young people across the world. Such studies help explain the simultaneous importance of both concrete, face-to-face, urban spectacles of protest and the dissemination of images and written propaganda online. Such variegated spatial networks stand in marked contrast to the relatively stable and ‘local’ debating society or coffee house of civil society in its 19th-century mode.

The Arab Spring and other forms of recent youth mobilization have proceeded largely outside formal party politics, institutional bodies, and readily identifiable social movements. It is important to enter a caveat. In some regions protesters made use of organizations, for example trade unions in Tunisia. But the protean and informal nature of protests is a recurrent theme. Ruthven (2011) stresses the spontaneous character of much of the web-based mobilization occurring recently in Syria and other parts of the Arab world. There seem to be no identifiable leaders or organizations, and there are no structures or plans in place for an alternative political system if the regime collapses. It is precisely this sense of spontaneity that is conveyed in Samuli Schielke’s (2011) extraordinary blog on the Egyptian ‘revolution’ of February 2011. Some commentators imagine this spontaneity as suggesting a lack of seriousness, as per the analyses of Marx and Engels and Bourdieu. But it is also possible to read the relatively unplanned, flexible nature of the mobilization as a strength.

Geographers have made similar points about unorganized action and spontaneity in other
writing. Kallio and Häkli (2011) draw attention to the numerous informal everyday ways in which young people circulate critiques and develop a political sensibility in contemporary Finland. That children and youth can also engage in critiques of society and effect change through their involvement in informal political mobilization is also evident in literature on friendship networks (Dyson, 2010), patron-client systems (Gardner, 2008) and young people’s consumption practices in urban settings (Collins, 2010).

Such studies point towards new ecologies of youth protest (cf. Jeffrey, 2008; Katz, 2004). The ecological metaphor does triple service. It highlights how technologies, materials and specific places are mutually entangled in the production of oppositional politics. It hints, too, at the complexity, spontaneity and mutability of action. And the ecologies metaphor – when clearly distinguished from its use by Chicago School sociologists – can provide a framework for examining the rhythms, regulations and improvisations that constitute politics in practice. The emerging ecologies of protest are ‘new’ because they make use of technologies previously unavailable, bridge national boundaries in ways that were previously impossible, and possess a fluidity and spontaneity which – if not quite unprecedented – is novel in its intensity. At the same time, commentators should deploy the notion of ecologies mindful of the capacity of the state to marshal and restrict young people’s mobilization, for example through controlling people’s use of the web.

**IV Conclusions: sentenced to hope?**

Two key dynamics are reshaping the contemporary world. First, a particular articulation of age and capitalism is occurring wherein young people are suffering from some of the most profound social hardships. These hardships often have common elements, including a decline in the quality of government education, widespread unemployment, and new forms of surveillance and control. In numerous contexts the media, governments, NGOs and parents enjoin young people to embrace a spirit of modernity, to ‘enterprise themselves’ or ‘polish their assets’, even as the paving stones to a viable future fall away under their feet. In the words of Syrian playwright Saadallah Wannous, young people are ‘sentenced to hope’ (Rodenbeck, 2011).

Second, young people are contesting dominant power through multiple forms of social and political critique and protest. This mobilization is sometimes effective. Mannheim’s emphasis on generational change remains a powerful analytical tool. Mannheim’s notion of ‘fresh contact’ points precisely towards the material, experiential dimensions of politics that are being elucidated by contemporary geographers.

But young people’s politics somehow belies conventional thinking on how effective oppositional politics unfolds. We somehow require a new political vocabulary to describe the sometimes spontaneous and typically complex politics of age and generation that is being played out on news screens across the world. The notion of new ecologies of protest provides one viable starting point.

This paper could have been written with reference to recent anthropological work, and a final question concerns what, if anything, geographers can add to the study of the hardships and response of children and youth in the current moment. Geographies of young people are distinct not because of their subject matter. It is not the case, for example, that geographers examine young people’s relationship to the environment thus leaving social and political issues to those in other disciplines. Rather, geographical studies of young people are distinguished from much anthropological and sociological work on the same topics by their relative determination to draw attention to comparative insights across space and their willingness to spell out the implication of findings for policy-makers. More than studies in
other disciplines, they also draw out how a focus on young people might illuminate wider debates on space, place and scale (see also Jeffrey, 2008, 2010a).

In a recent progress report on the history and nature of geography, Richard Powell (2011) raises the important question of what if anything is geography’s ‘value added’ in the present conjuncture. My sense – derived from a focus on young people’s geographies – is of a discipline that has at its heart not a specific topic of interest but a set of shared commitments: a comparative urge, a broad approach to theory, a critical sensibility, and an abiding interest in thinking carefully about space, place and the environment.

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