

Youth and Social Movements: Key Lessons for Allies

December 17, 2012

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The Kinder & Braver World Project: Research Series (danah boyd, John Palfrey, and Dena Sacco, editors)

Brought to you by the Born This Way Foundation & the Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University, and supported by the John D. & Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation

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Youth Justice Coalition's 50-Mile March For Respect, Los Angeles, December 2012. Photo by Youth Justice Coalition.

I. INTRODUCTION

Young people are often key actors in powerful social movements that transform the course of human history. Indeed, youth have been deeply important to every progressive social movement, including the United States Civil Rights movement, the transnational LGBTQ movement, successive waves of feminism, environmentalism and environmental justice, the labor, antiwar, and immigrant rights movements, and more. In each of these cases, young people took part in many ways, including through the appropriation of the “new media” tools of their time, which they used to create, circulate, and amplify movement voices and stories. Yet today, youth are often framed in the mass media as, at best, apathetic, disengaged, and removed from civic action. At worst, youth (in the U.S., particularly youth of color) are subject to growing repression: increased surveillance, heightened policing, stop-and-frisk policies on the streets, overbroad gang injunctions, and spiraling rates of juvenile incarceration. In this short article, I argue that we have much to learn from young people who are already engaged in mobilizing their peers, families, and communities towards positive social transformation. I discuss key challenges, and provide recommendations for

educators and adult allies of youth movements.

II. YOUTH INVOLVEMENT IN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Youth participation in social movements can provide us with important insights. While the following examples are drawn primarily from progressive movements in the U.S., I believe that the key points about youth agency and participation extend across geography and political orientation.

Young people can be powerful agents of social change. Many young people have the desire and capacity to transform the world, and are looking for opportunities to do so. In fact, youth have been key actors in nearly every major social movement in modern history. During the U.S. Civil Rights movement, Claudette Colvin was just 15 when she was arrested for refusing to give up her seat on a Montgomery Bus to a white person (nine months before Rosa Parks). Young Civil Rights activists like Diane Nash developed new tactics like the Freedom Rides, and built powerful movement organizations such as the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee. Youth activism is sometimes framed as a thing of the past, but nothing could be further from the truth. In the past year alone, young people have been important participants in movements to topple dictatorships in Tunisia and Egypt, protest austerity measures and corruption in Greece and Spain, and defend public education in Canada and Chile. Young people across the world took part in the Occupy movement to draw attention to rising wealth inequality. Courageous undocumented youth activists (like Jorge Gutierrez, Nancy Meza, and many more in networks like United We Dream and Dreamactivist.org) conducted sit-ins that, in 2012, built enough pressure to force the Obama administration to announce a temporary deferral on the deportation of undocumented youth. These are only a few of many recent examples.

Youth often innovate social movement media practices. We see this across movements and across decades: girls and young women created riot-grrl feminist Zine culture, record labels, and a DIY music industry in the 80s and early 90s. Middle and high school students used MySpace and text messages, as well as flyers and film screenings, to circulate information about high school walkouts against the anti-immigrant Sensenbrenner bill (HR4437) in 2006. In 2007, youth used blogs and social media to organize actions around the civil rights issues prompted by the Jena 6 case, and in 2010 used Ustream to livestream DREAM activist sit-ins in Senator McCain's office to call attention to the need for immigration reform. In 2012, they used Facebook and Twitter to circulate information about Justice for Trayvon Martin, a black youth murdered by a neighborhood watchman. Young people appropriate every new form of media for their own ends, including for social movement purposes.

Youth can speak truth to power, in ways their peers can hear. Young activists often

develop powerful concepts and use sophisticated aesthetic forms to call out or identify systems of oppression, speak up, and mobilize their peers. For example, take a look at the approaches used by groups like Youth Justice Coalition in Los Angeles, FIERCE LGBTQ youth and Global Action Project in New York City, and Detroit Future Youth. Peer-to-peer learning extends to social movement activity as well as to other areas that are more commonly discussed, such as digital media literacies. The Civil Rights Movement developed Freedom Schools; youth organizers today have developed spaces and networks for sharing both organizing and media making skills. During the annual Allied Media Conference in Detroit, young people from many different movement networks gather to build stronger alliances through sharing media-making, technology, and artistic skills. For example, check out the “Shawty got Skillz Skillshare” and “DiscoTech” approaches to creating safe spaces for peer-to-peer learning among young women and girls of color.

Youth movements frequently operate outside formal channels of political participation. While many youth do participate in formal organizations (student groups, local chapters of national organizations, and so on), young people are more likely to become connected to social movement activity through their family or community. In addition, youth movements are increasingly transnational. Young people, especially immigrant youth, are often directly connected to social movements in other parts of the world, and are inspired by movements that they encounter via social media or television. In addition, youth involved in social movements often engage in prefigurative politics: this means that they attempt to organize according to the principles they would like to see enacted in the broader world.

Often, youth who have to struggle the hardest develop the strongest connections to social movements. For example, in the U.S., LGBTQ youth of color, while often suffering violence, oppression, and exclusion, are also doing some of the most powerful organizing work. LGBTQ youth have been a key part of many modern social movements, not just LGBTQ struggles. In the U.S., many youth activists believe that explicitly challenging racism remains a crucial task for social transformation. Around the globe, wherever we look closely at social movements, we find that some of the most “invisible” young people are also the most active, engaged, and creative in movement strategy and tactics, as well as media production and use.

III. KEY CHALLENGES

Although youth have been and continue to be involved in progressive social movements, they face powerful challenges.

First, youth movements are mostly invisible, within the broader context of systematic misrepresentation of youth throughout the globalized media system. Positive messages about

youth agency, while laudable, frequently focus on individual behavior change; youth are rarely represented as social movement participants or leaders.

Second, not all young people are “Digital Natives.” Many people assume that youth automatically understand all forms of digital media. While young people do often have a certain comfort level with information and communication technologies (ICTs) compared to adults, youth digital media literacies are radically unequal, structured by lines of class, race, gender, and geography. In a landscape where social movement participation is increasingly mediated through networked ICTs, access inequality undermines the potentially emancipatory potential of youth movements.

Third, there's a War on Youth. Unfortunately, it is impossible to talk about youth movements in the U.S. without also talking about what youth organizers like Kim McGill (of Youth Justice Coalition) and critical educators like Henry A. Giroux refer to as the War on Youth. Youth of color, particularly young Black and brown boys but increasingly also girls, are targeted by laws, policies, and practices of heightened surveillance, repression, and criminalization. These push youth out of schools and into prisons, in a system that youth organizers call the “school-to-prison pipeline.” So-called Stop-and-Frisk policies and gang injunctions are deployed primarily in low income communities of color, and youth movements of color have also historically been targeted as “gangs” (for example, the Black Panther Party and the Young Lords). There is a growing youth-led movement against Stop-and-Frisk, strongest in major cities like New York City and Los Angeles but spreading across the country. Supporting youth movements includes challenging repressive laws, policies, and practices.

IV. HOW TO SUPPORT YOUTH MOVEMENTS

Educators and adult allies who want to support youth organizers can help in the following ways. This is not meant to be a comprehensive list, but to provide some key points based on what we know about how youth movements work:

Respect and Recognition. Start from a place of respect for young people's autonomy, opinions, desires, and actual capacity to take part in and lead powerful social movements that can truly transform the world. In addition, do not dismiss youth who do engage in prefigurative politics as “unfocused,” “ineffective,” or “idealistic.” Young people considered rash by their elders have often sparked social transformation that was later seen as “inevitable,” such as the Civil Rights Movement. Instead of shutting down youth activists, adult allies can engage in open dialogue about strategy and tactics and take youth opinions seriously.

Representation. Challenge racist, misogynist, and heteronormative representations of

young people wherever you find them. Lift up and share examples of young people who do get involved in social movements, or even better, help create opportunities for youth activists to share their own experiences with peers.

Real talk. Have open conversations with youth about systems of power, oppression, resistance, and liberation. Capitalism, racism, and patriarchy, as well as individualism, competition, and consumerism, are interlinked systems that deeply impact all young people's lives. Discuss them together in intergenerational spaces, without trying to impose one “correct” way of understanding them. Together, youth and adult allies can surface alternative narratives like unity, equity, diversity, respect, inclusion, bravery, and connected fate. Encourage, rather than suppress, gender and race talk, and explicitly address structural and institutional racism and patriarchy, while supporting the development of an intersectional analysis. Real talk helps youth build real movements.

V. CONCLUSION

Youth are often dismissed for a lack of civic engagement, or attacked for being disruptive. Yet disruption of oppressive laws, norms, and practices is a crucial aspect of all liberatory movements: think of the struggle to end slavery, or to gain suffrage for women. We should recognize and respect young people as potentially powerful social movement actors, and allocate resources to support, amplify, and extend their impact.

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Youth Justice Coalition: <http://www.youth4justice.org>