

## **Old Politics and New Media Technologies: Conflicts of Generation and Internet Discourses in the Labour Movement in Britain.**

**Dr Veronica Barassi**

Institute of Contemporary European Studies (ICES)  
Paper Presented at the New Media Youth and Social Change Conference  
Northampton University, 8<sup>th</sup> May 2010  
[barassiv@regents.ac.uk](mailto:barassiv@regents.ac.uk)

***Paper not for circulation***

### **Introduction**

With this paper I would like to question the 'belief' that new media technologies can guarantee the political engagement of younger generations. I will do so by looking at the ethnographic context of international solidarity campaigns and the Trade unions in Britain.

My research project explored the relationship between alternative media and political action, and aimed understand the way in which this relationship has changed with the advent of new media technologies. The data presented in this paper was collected during a year long ethnographic fieldwork amongst international solidarity campaigns and the Trade Unions in Britain, combined with the textual analysis of the media they produced, and with 37 one hour long interviews with members and activists in the Trade Union Movement.

### **The Labour Movement and the Lack of Young People Involvement**

As some of you may know, the Labour movement in Britain is defined by the construction of economic and political networks between different organisations. Trade Unions organisations and different single issue campaigning organisations (CND, international solidarity etc.) political parties (LP, Communist Party) and Left wing publications such as the Morning Star Daily. One particular characteristic of this networked movement that cannot pass unnoticed to a participant observer as he or she enters in trade Union conference or event is the lack of involvement form younger generations.

During fieldwork, the lack of young people's involvement in labour politics was a central issue discussed within many different interviews. At times, especially when I was talking to older members, interviewees started to show distress in front of the idea that their world was dying.

When confronted with the question of why they thought that Labour politics was no longer appealing to young activists, some would blame the changing, the new areas of labour emerging (esp. with the Information and communication industry), and the failure of Trade Unions to address them. Others contended that the reason behind the lack of young people's involvement had to be found within the historical context, and the legacy of Thatcherism. According to my informants, young people 'don't care' about politics because they have been affected by the individualist discourses of neoliberalism.

Since the very beginning of researching the conflict of generations within the Labour movement, I was confronted by the widespread belief that the 'key' to solving the generation issue needs to be found within the socio-technical domains of new media technologies (and especially SNS). This belief needs to be contextualised within a larger trend in Britain that sees the internet as having new and emancipatory qualities for engaging younger generations (Loader, 2007; Trevorrow, 2007).

Now this seems to be more of a belief than a reality. In fact as Livingstone *et al* (2007) have argued with their research on young people in the UK, the likelihood of the younger generation's political engagement through online terrains is dependent upon offline factors. Furthermore, as Baumgartner and Morris have shown with reference to social media, there is no evidence that Web 2.0 technologies can guarantee political engagement more than other form of media. (UK Elections). In this context, therefore it is important to question why people seem to believe that new media technologies have emancipatory qualities for the involvement of younger generations.

### **The Powerful Discourse of New Media Technologies**

By looking at the ethnographic context of the Labour Movement in Britain I came to the conclusion that the origin of this belief needs to be found in two different assumptions. The first assumption is that new media technologies enable new forms of political participation, which are flexible and do not stress on

membership and belonging. This assumption grounds itself in the way in which people relate differently to online and offline media. As I have argued elsewhere (Barassi, 2009a, Barassi, 2009b) within the social world of international campaigning organisations, whilst printed media are usually seen as the main constructor of membership and collective identity, online media are perceived overall as more flexible and as not directly related to collective feelings of political belonging. The second assumption is that idea that young people are affected by individualistic understandings and they don't care about politics.

Hence, for their flexible and individually-centred, qualities, new media seem to be a better form of communication in order to appeal to younger generations. If we wish to conceptually analyse these assumptions, the paper contends, and understand the reasons why people seem to believe that internet technologies guarantee the creation of a new form of sociality which is flexible, individualist and networked we should look at the work of Castells (2001, 2009). Castells argued that internet technologies have become the material support of a new type of sociality. This type of sociality has little to do with the idea of 'virtual community' that permeated earlier understandings of social interaction in the online world (Rheingold, 1994). Drawing from Wellman (2001) Castells contends that the new sociality promoted by new media is one in which the individual becomes the central actor; it is the sociality of '*networked-individualism*'. This form of sociality has become pervasive in different areas of social life, especially within social movements (Castells, 2009), and younger generations of activists.

Castells' (2001, 2009) understanding of networked individualism enables us to better analyse the basic assumptions behind the belief that by relying on the more fluid and flexible networks of internet technologies, political organisations in Britain can secure younger generations political engagement. At the same time, however, it can be detrimental when we wish to analyse the complex relationship between imagination, internet networks and new forms of belonging that are emerging amongst younger generations.

### **Beyond Political Identity? Young People and New Ideas of Political Participation**

During fieldwork I had different informal conversations with members of younger generations (35 people between 19-28 years old), who would participate at some events and trade union conferences. By talking to them it emerged that they believed that amongst younger generations there is a profound sense of

disillusion in British politics, a sense that has been strengthened especially following the perceived failure of the 2003 anti-war movement.

Disenchantment and disillusionment in Labour politics that was triggered by the policies of the New Labour, however, cannot be understood as the only explanation for the lack of younger generations' political engagement in the Labour movement. Another explanation can be found in the fact that there seems to be a gap between the way in which young people think and experience political belonging today, and the ideas of political identity and affiliation that are constantly reinforced by Trade Union organisations.

During interviews I was surprised to notice that most of the young people I talked to would participate to conferences and events, would be active in grassroots movements, yet they would reject the idea of belonging to a political organisation or a group. Rhodri, a 22 year old student, once told me that he strongly believed in collective action and in trying to promote a less savage form of capitalism. Yet he did not believe in the idea of "defining enemies or friends", of drawing lines and boundaries and associating with a particular political organisation.

When he mentioned that, I was particularly surprised. Defining enemies and friends – or in other words establishing sameness and difference - constitutes the very basis for the construction of identity (Cohen, 1985; Collier et al, 1995; Hall, 2000). Therefore, I reached the conclusion that despite believing in collective action, young generations seem to be rejecting the classical understanding of *political identity*, which was promoted by the membership politics of labour politics.

### **Newtorked Affinities and New Media Technologies:**

My interpretation is that if we wish to conceptualise, the way in which younger generations are re-defining the understanding of political participation, we must consider the influence of the global justice movements and *their* relationship with new media technologies. The movements for global justice developed following the creation of the People Global Action Network, a network of different civil society organisations that was created against the North American Free Trade Agreement, and in support of the uprising of an indigenous group in Chiapas, known as the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional.

These movements detached themselves from other forms of political struggle for two main reasons: firstly because they were the first to rely on digital networks to build a world-wide movement. Secondly because they introduced new ways in which to think of political participation.

With the rise of the global justice movements, as many have argued (Day, 2005; Holloway, 2002; Graeber, 2002) the 'politics of demand' that was fostered by new social movements had gradually been replaced by an understanding that the emancipations of political identities are constantly instrumentalised by power forces. Amongst the movements for global justice, therefore, political identity, is no longer a reason for struggle or the very ground for cohesion. It is being replaced by more hybrid and 'nomadic' understandings of engagement and participation, which focus on politics of 'affinity' rather than politics of 'identity'. They rely on a politics of affinity, which is based on an understanding of 'groundless solidarity' (solidarity that is not based on identity) and 'infinite responsibility' (Agamben, 1993; Day, 2005).

In understanding the autonomous and affinity based discourses embedded in the global justice movements, we cannot overlook the impact of online technologies and the 'network' as political imaginary. The People Global Action network was made possible due to the development of the World Wide Web. New technologies and practices enabled people to see that networks of affinity and solidarity could be established beyond and across state borders.

Therefore, on a similar line of reasoning of Castells' (2001) my understanding is that internet technologies impacted on the political imagination of the global justice movements by fostering the logic of networked sociality. However, in contrast to him I believe these movements imagined this networked sociality according to their own political project. Amongst them, the network became not the expression of a type of networked-individualism, but the representation of un-hierarchical and affinity based relationships, which create themselves beyond state borders and are based on notions of 'autonomy' and 'solidarity' (Graeber, 2002: 68).

## **Conclusion:**

The paper contends that if we want to understand the way in which younger generations are re-imagining political participation, we must take into account the influence of the global justice movements, their anarchists' currents, and internet strategies. Only by doing so, this paper contends, we can start reflecting on the complex relationship between new media technologies, young generations and political participation.

After what has been said, rather than developing new online platforms in order to appeal to younger generations, political organisations should start re-thinking their own political culture and practices.

This is because perhaps it is not younger generations who are disaffected from political participation but rather political parties, institutions, organisations who by focusing on the practices of representative democracy are distancing themselves from young people's understanding of political engagement (Griffin, 2005: 151; Loader, 2007:1-19).

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