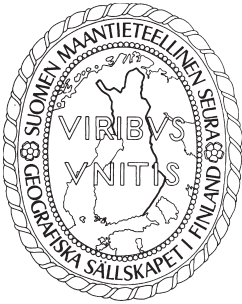


Reflections

An 'inconvenient truth'? The problem of recognition of the political message – commentary to Huttunen and Albrecht

GEORGIOS KYROGLOU



Kyroglou, G. (2021) An 'inconvenient truth'? The problem of recognition of the political message – commentary to Huttunen and Albrecht. *Fennia* 199(1) 139–143. <https://doi.org/10.11143/fennia.108034>

This commentary reflects on Huttunen and Albrecht's exploration of the representations of young people's environmental citizenship within the framing of the Fridays for Future (FFF) movement in the Finnish news media and on Twitter. In particular, it problematises the issue of the recognition of young people's agency by their adult contemporaries, at a watershed moment for global environmental activism. It argues that although young people actively bring the climate change in the forefront of political discussion aiming to shape how environmental responsibility is being understood, the success of the movement will largely depend on the acknowledgement of their political message by its intended recipients; namely their adult contemporaries and politicians.

Keywords: environmental movement, climate strikes, political participation, young people, youth activism

Georgios Kyrogrou (<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4111-5544>), School of Social Sciences, Nottingham Trent University, 50 Shakespeare Street, Nottingham, NG1 4FQ, United Kingdom. E-mail: georgios.kyrogrou@ntu.ac.uk

Nothing is inherently political;
politicisation requires a political agent
which can transform the taken-for-granted
into the up-for-grabs (Fisher 2009, 79)

In maybe one of the most widely-cited articles in the field of political participation, Brady (1999, 739) identifies four intertwined elements in virtually all available definitions of political participation. These are a) activities or actions, b) by ordinary citizens, c) intended to influence a desired outcome, and addressed towards d) politicians, government personnel, or decision-makers. In their article, Huttunen and Albrecht discuss the first three as parts of the three separate but interconnected frames they have identified with regards to the FFF climate strikes in Finland: the 'sustainable lifestyle'; the 'active youth' and the 'school attendance' frame. The backbone of their analysis derives from the acknowledgment that "young people are political actors and that their agency should be better recognised" (Huttunen & Albrecht 2021, 47). But as I will argue in this brief commentary, it is this recognition of young people's agency that can be particularly problematic.

The political agency of young people has been the focus of an extensive body of work. The available understandings range from young people as passive neoliberal consumers to radical revolutionary rioters (Bowman 2014; Kyrogrou & Henn 2017; Pickard *et al.* 2020). Ginwright,

Cammarota and Noguera (2006, xiii) point out that “youth activism has always played a central role in the democratic process and continues to forge new ground for social change” (Elsen & Ord 2021). The methods of the Fridays For Future (FFF) mobilisations are clearly defined in the article as “consist[ing] of young people striking on Fridays for climate” (Huttunen & Albrecht 2021, 47). Following the example of its leading figure Greta Thunberg, the FFF movement demonstrates in practice how a one-person political action may create ripple effects in a conducive socio-political environment and achieve eventually global repercussions. In turn, young people are taking the lead by addressing the (adult) politicians, with the aim of forcing them to take environmental action. Huttunen and Albrecht (2021, 46–47) clarify: “[t]he FFF movement [...] is a grassroots environmental movement that uses protest tactics to demonstrate against the inadequate climate actions taken by politicians”. According to the first three elements of Brady’s definition therefore, the FFF mobilisations in Finland comprise of ‘young people taking action for environmental change’ and epitomise – in the famous words of Abraham Lincoln in the Gettysburg Address – the necessary requirements of democratic governance in western liberal democracies: “...government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth” (Oppenheimer & Edwards 2012, 232).

These three elements in Brady’s definition broadly coincide with the three frames Huttunen and Albrecht have identified in their article: the ‘active youth’ frame defines the agency behind the action as residing on young people. The ‘school attendance’ frame indicates the methods of chosen actions, whereby young people skip school to demonstrate for their environmental concerns. In turn, the ‘sustainable lifestyle’ frame captures the intended outcome of the said actions, which aims to influence change through individual lifestyle choices. These frames are defined as the processes “...by which ‘ordinary people’ make sense of public issues” (Huttunen & Albrecht 2021, 50).

The analysis of the frames of the movement in the Finnish news media and Twitter however, reveals an additional frame which although it consistently operates in the undercurrent, it by-and-large shapes the other three. This has been very poignantly identified by the authors in what they call an ‘adult voice’ (Huttunen & Albrecht 2021, 54). As they put it, “...despite the FFF being a movement for the young, the discussions online were not youth-centred” (*ibid.*, 54). Instead, “[t]he adult voice was present in all types of tweets and reactions” (*ibid.*, 54). My understanding is that this adult-voice refers to the process of ‘interpretation’ and the eventual ‘recognition’ (or not) by the adults of the political message of young people. Greta’s initial message about the urgency of environmental action has found fertile ground in the voices of other young people globally. The proliferation and reproduction of the FFF mobilisations worldwide is merely the manifestation of young people having successfully received – and acted upon – this message. As a result, Huttunen and Albrecht (2021, 47) point out that “the international FFF climate strike mobilised over 1.6 million young people around the world” in March 2019, whereas “7.6 million took it to the streets in 185 countries” by September of the same year.

During this time however, the movement found itself in its next impasse which consists of the ‘recognition’ or the ‘interpretation’ of young people’s message by the adults, many of whom are the politicians, government personnel, or the decision-makers that can raise young people’s ‘lifestyle’ political message on the institutional domain. But the interpretation of the final recipient is often nothing like the original message. I believe that Huttunen and Albrecht make – maybe – their most significant contribution in the article by exploring the problems behind the recognition of young people’s political message by the adults on Twitter and the mainstream media of the country. In the words of a young climate activist, this message is: “We, young people, have held enough strikes; now it is time for you adults to demonstrate and tell the policymakers that we have to act now” (Tola 2019 in Huttunen & Albrecht 2021, 52).

The problem of the recognition of the political message behind a political action is of course not new. For instance, only a few years ago the UK witnessed a series of riots of young people in London and all around the country in August 2011 (Lightowlers 2015). Should one classify these riots as a form of political participation? After all, they adhere to the first three components of Brady’s conceptualisations of political participation, insofar they involved a) actions, b) by ordinary people, in order c) to bring about desired change.

Although the Labour Party condemned the acts of violence across Britain, it recognised that there was an “inconvenient truth” – reminiscent of Al Gore’s 2006 environmental campaign about global

warming – in the form of the message passed by the rioters, which should be addressed by politicians (Lamprianou 2013, 23). As a result, the riots were perceived by the Labour Party as actions (albeit admittedly unlawful) by ordinary citizens charged with a discernible political message. In other words, the praxis of the riots was an unlawful, but symbolically effective political way of expressing the ordinary citizens' demands for change. On the other hand however, the UK Prime Minister at the time, David Cameron, on the 15 of August 2011 in Oxfordshire, dismissed the London riots as acts of "pure criminality" (Lamprianou 2013, 23), on the grounds that they were not involving the mainstream political sphere. In essence, their *telos* was not achieved through a narrow set of 'prespecified' and 'lawful' praxis, in order for it to be considered political as conventionally defined.

An even more recent example may be found in the differing conceptualisation of the Black Lives Matter mobilisations, in Minnesota but also around the globe in March 2020. The Republican US president Donald Trump, tweeted that these were merely an act of "thuggery" (CBS News 2020), whereas the opposition leader at the time Joe Biden portrayed the mobilisations in response to George Floyd's murder "...just the latest in a series of injustices stemming from racism against black people" (Mangan 2020), and called for institutional reforms in the police forces.

Likewise, Huttunen and Albrecht under the '*school attendance*' frame discuss the requirement of a 'prespecified' praxis for the message to be 'acceptable' in the eyes of the adult recipients. For example, the authors show how the National Board of Education missed the content of the message entirely, stating that "students have the freedom of speech, but it does not mean that they can freely be absent from school" (Huttunen & Albrecht 2021, 53). In this way, the public's attention was conveniently "...distracted from the young people's demand for systemic change" (*ibid.*, 53). Such a narrow interpretation of political action which needs to involve some kind of 'acceptable' or externally and upwardly-defined 'right' way of making a political statement however, would exclude even the French Revolution as the par-excellence symbolic manifestation of popular political participation, on the grounds that its praxis was fundamentally 'unlawful' and not 'political' insofar it did not directly include the aristocracy of the time.

The almost comical-if-it-wasn't-so-serious effect of the misinterpretation of young people's intended political message may be better discerned under the '*sustainable lifestyle*' frame. This has been previously very poignantly described by Fisher in his brilliant 'Postcapitalist Desire'. Discussing a clip from a former Tory MP's 2010 appearance in a UK comedy panel show at the time of Occupy London, Fisher (2020, 39) writes: "What she famously claimed was that the protesters of Occupy had no authenticity or validity because they went into Starbucks, and maybe they had iPhones [...] They've got iPhones and therefore they can't really be anti-capitalist". Likewise, Huttunen and Albrecht (2021, 51) report how the young strikers were criticised by users of Twitter based on their lifestyle choices, such as "...driving a moped, contributing to food waste in schools because of the strike, or using a Chinese cell phone...". Similarly to the criticism of the former MP, many social media users concluded that "...the strikers were hypocritical for demanding climate actions while making unecological choices in their everyday lives" (*ibid.*, 51). Once again the authors discern an 'adult voice' behind these tweets, which paternalistically 'advise' for different lifestyle choices, in order to 'grant' its recognition of their political message and therefore political agency.

This last point leads ultimately to the discussion of the '*active youth*' frame. Fisher (2020, 39) making a similar point identifies a narrative about subliminal desire, or as Brady (1999) would put it, the intended outcome behind the action. This narrative further advances the criticism of the adult-voice under the '*sustainable lifestyle*' frame discussed above: "These protesters have the products of advanced capitalism therefore...it's not only that they're hypocrites, it's that they don't really want what they say they want [...] They may claim ethically that they want to live in a different world but libidinally, at the level of desire, they are committed to living within the current capitalist world" (Fisher 2020, 39). This framing denies the political agency of young people by essentially refusing not only their voice, but their ability to identify their own desires. It implies a paternalistic imposition, which instead of closing its ears to young people's voice, it deliberately misconstrues it: 'Yes, I hear you..' it says. 'You may indeed be saying that this is what you want, but let me know better'. It conceives political agency of young people as something that is being 'given' and certainly not as something that young people are ready for. The climate strikes therefore are being re-framed as mere political

rehearsals. Huttunen and Albrecht (2021, 52) very eloquently capture this by saying “Instead of seeing the young strikers as citizens with political influence and the right to affect their future, these children were seen as citizens-to-be” and the FFF movement as a good opportunity to train their political agency – but not to actively exercise it.

The discussion above points back to the problem of the recognition of the political message by its intended recipients. For a political message to be deemed as such, it does not suffice to consist of ‘actions for desired change’. These actions must also be publicly recognised as such. This means however, that the young people’s own intent behind their actions do not suffice to determine the latter’s political character. Even though none of these frames may fully capture the full extent of subjectivities of each individual protestor, the recognition and interpretation of their political message rests largely in the eye-of-the-beholder. Pickard (2019) posits in the words of Schwartz (1984, 1118) that “whether something counts as being political participation depends on our point of view, our interpretation, our conceptual template [...]. Participation is subjective contingent on the conceptual lens of the observer”.

Late Prof. Inglehart (1971) attributed shifts in values between young people and their older contemporaries to the differential socioeconomic conditions during their formative years. As the authors acknowledge “young people’s views on politics and participation differ from those of older people” (Huttunen & Albrecht 2021, 47). In that respect therefore, Huttunen and Albrecht make a significant contribution in exploring the frames through which young people’s political participation in the FFF movement is being understood, recognised and eventually validated by their older contemporaries. They discern three intertwined frames, namely the ‘sustainable lifestyle’; the ‘active youth’ and the ‘school attendance’ frame. Implicit behind all three they discern also an ‘adult-voice’ in the discussion.

Irrespective of the framing of the FFF movement by its adult recipients in the Finnish news media and on Twitter, young people have undoubtedly already voiced their political message. The FFF movement has managed to “bring the climate change in the forefront of political discussion, transforming the focus in discussions to actual solutions” shaping at the same time “how environmental issues and responsibilities are [being] perceived” (Huttunen & Albrecht 2021, 55) in the mainstream political discourse. However, the success of the movement will largely depend on the acknowledgement of their political message by its intended recipients; namely their adult contemporaries and politicians.

References

- Bowman, B. (2014) 2011: Young rioters and imagined revolution in the British Utopia of Calm. *Postcolonial Studies* 17(1) 90–103. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13688790.2014.912189>
- Brady, H. E. (1999) Political participation. *Measures of Political Attitudes* 2 737–801.
- CBS News (2020) ‘When the looting starts, the shooting starts’: Trump tweet flagged by Twitter for ‘glorifying violence’ 29.5.2020. <<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/trump-minneapolis-protesters-thugs-flagged-twitter/>>. 3.6.2021.
- Elsen, F. & Ord, J. (2021) The role of adults in “youth led” climate groups: enabling empowerment. *Frontiers in Political Science* 3 [online Apr 23 2021] <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpos.2021.641154>
- Elsen, F. & Ord, J. (2021) The role of adults in “youth led” climate groups: enabling empowerment. *Frontiers in Political Science* 3 [online Apr 23 2021] <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpos.2021.641154>
- Fisher, M. (2009) *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* Zer0 Books, Winchester, UK.
- Fisher, M. (2020) *Postcapitalist Desire: The Final Lectures*. Repeater Books, London, UK.
- Ginwright, S., Cammarota, J. & Noguera, P. (2006) *Beyond Resistance!: Youth Activism and Community Change: New Democratic Possibilities for Practice and Policy for America’s Youth*. Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, Oxon, UK.
- Huttunen, J. & Albrecht, E. (2021) The framing of environmental citizenship and youth participation in the Fridays for Future Movement in Finland. *Fennia* 199(1) 46–60. <https://doi.org/10.11143/fennia.102480>
- Inglehart, R. (1971) The silent revolution in Europe: intergenerational change in post-industrial societies. *American Political Science Review* 65(4) 991–1017. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1953494>
- Kyroglou, G. & Henn, M. (2017) Political consumerism as a neoliberal response to youth political disengagement. *Societies* 7(4) 34. <https://doi.org/10.3390/soc7040034>
- Lamprianou, I. (2013) Contemporary political participation research: a critical assessment. In Demetriou, K. (ed.) *Democracy in Transition*, 21–42. Springer, Berlin. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-642-30068-4_2

- Lightowlers, C. L. (2015) Let's get real about the 'riots': exploring the relationship between deprivation and the English summer disturbances of 2011. *Critical Social Policy* 35(1) 89–109. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0261018314545597>
- Mangan, D. (2020) Biden 'furious' over Trump's call for violence against Americans in Minneapolis protests of George Floyd death. CNBC 29.5.2020 <<https://www.cbc.com/2020/05/29/george-floyd-biden-blasts-trump-minneapolis-protest-tweets.html>>. 3.6.2021.
- Oppenheimer, D. & Edwards, M. (2012) *Democracy Despite Itself: Why a System That Shouldn't Work at All Works So Well*. MIT Press. <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/9195.001.0001>
- Pickard, S. (2019) Defining and measuring political participation and young people. In *Politics, Protest and Young People*, 57–87. Palgrave Macmillan, London. https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-57788-7_3
- Pickard, S., Bowman, B. & Arya, D. (2020) "We are radical in our kindness": the political socialisation, motivations, demands and protest actions of young environmental activists in Britain. *Youth and Globalization* 2(2) 251–280. <https://doi.org/10.1163/25895745-02020007>
- Schwartz, J. D. (1984) Participation and multisubjective understanding: an interpretivist approach to the study of political participation. *The Journal of Politics* 46(4) 1117–1141. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2131245>