

Riots, Resistance & Resignation: Young people & politics in the UK

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Anarchy in the UK?

A contradictory & complex field



Introduction: a whirlwind tour!

- **1. Apathy, Resignation & Individualism**
 - Explaining Youth 'Apathy'?
 - 'Poverty Talk'
- **2. Youth & Précarité**
 - The precariatization of youth & 'the 4 As'
- **3. The Precariat & The 'Politics of the Inferno'**
 - The 2011 English Riots
 - The Rise of the Right
- **4. The Precariat & The 'Politics of Paradise'**
 - Anti-fascist, anti-resistance resistance
 - New grass-roots protest campaigns
 - Scottish politics
- **5. Summary & conclusion**



Young people & politics in the UK

Part 1: Apathy, Resignation & Individualism?

- General assumption or *allegation* of **apathy**
- But voting trends indicate youth not *qualitatively* different to adults re: political engagement/ voting
- **May 2015 UK General Election:**
- **58% of 18-24s voted** (estimate)... (52% 2010)
- **66% overall** (65% 2010).
- Conservatives won overall majority (no age breakdown in voting, yet)



Not 'apathy' but...

1. **Realism/ cynicism/ distrust**: 'they' re all the same' ;
MPs expenses scandal; 'Punch & Judy' politics
2. **Social disconnection from 'politics'** , MPs,
Westminster, EU: grey men in grey suits



Not 'apathy' but...

3. **Ignorance** (a source of embarrassment) – 'politics' as a failing, 'I don't know'.
 - Withering of class-cultural apprenticeships into the working class/ working class politics/ Trade Unionism
 - **'Behind a thin democratic veil, Britain is a society which relies on apathy and self-interest and ignorance as the conditions for its political stability'** (Williamson, 1990: 16)

4. **Individualism/ individualisation**
 - 'Biographical project of the self', in late modernity. Denial of structure. Hyper-agentic view of the world/ 'epistemological fallacy' →

Individualism & Anti-solidarity: 'them' & 'us'

- 'The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas' (Marx, *The German Ideology*)
- Ruling ideas become 'common sense', 'taken-for-granted' - even amongst the victims of these ideas (cf: Gramsci)



People don't like other poor people, and rather than blame the people that make you all poor, you blame each other.

(Johnny Rotten)

- In other words, victim-blaming, 'moral underclass' ideas can be very popular amongst the victims of these ideas

Individualism & Anti-solidarity: 'them' & 'us'... 'Poverty Talk'



The Sociological Review

Shildrick & MacDonald (2013)

- *'Poverty talk: how people experiencing poverty deny their poverty and why they blame 'the poor'*
- <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1467-954X.12018/abstract>
- 60 men/ women, from Teesside NE England
- Living in material hardship/ 'poverty'
- Yet they denied their poverty
- & morally condemned 'the poor' = people who were undeserving & unable to 'manage'
- Strong '**scrounger-phobia**': disgust/ hatred of those 'on benefits'

'Poverty Talk': blaming 'the poor'

- Over the other side of the estate, yeah. Very poor. Some of the places that are over there are awful. There is crime constantly and they are very poor and the kids haven't got much, but that's because the parents are spending it all on drugs or getting drunk every night. (Mary, 30, 'unemployed', mother)
- I've seen children even now in this day and age where it's jam and bread because mum and dad has gambled it or boozed it or whatever but that's never been the case for us...the children have always come first...even when we have really struggled (Diane, 40, 'unemployed', mother).

Explaining 'Poverty Talk'?

1. People compared themselves 'locally' with others like them; not seeing inequality (or their relative poverty)
2. It is shameful to be 'poor'/ on welfare benefits in the UK – people discursively distance themselves from 'poor people'
3. 'Blaming the poor' dominates in contexts where solidaristic working-class life is in decline (e.g. Trade Unions)



Young people & politics in the UK

Part 2: Youth & Précarité



- A wider understanding of 'politics' – beyond voting & party politics

The precariatization of youth...

'I think it is probably the first time, at least since the Second World War, that a new generation faces the future with less confidence than the previous generation'.

(José Manuel Barroso, President of the European Commission, 2011)



- Nearly **5 million** under 25s were unemployed in the EU; **21.4%** (Dec 2014)
- Even higher rates of **under-employment...**

Youth transitions...to?

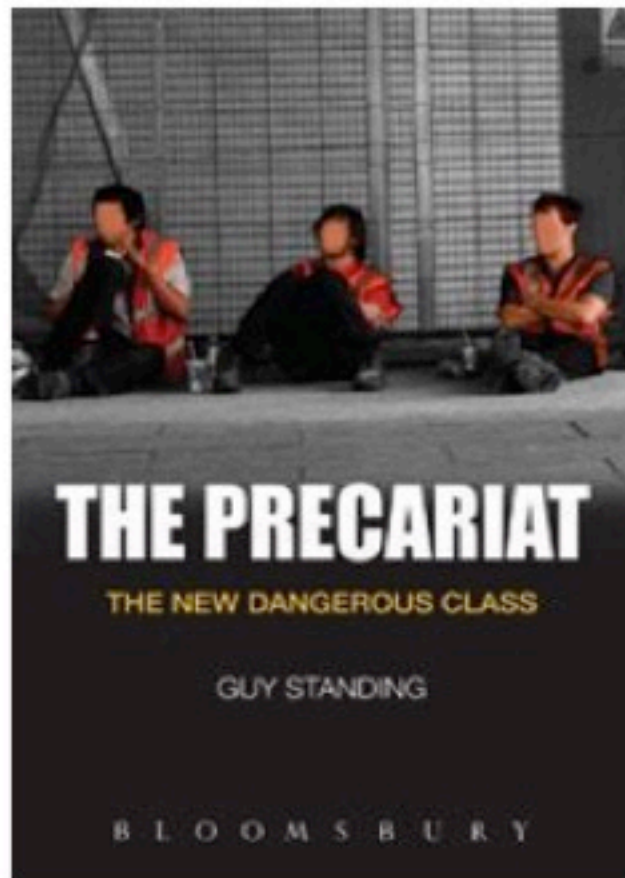
- 'What do I want in 5 years time? A steady job, steady income. A wee family and things. You can't do that without a job... you need a job to just grow up, more or less. So a job isn't just a job, it's more than a job. **It's the future of your life...**But, aye, I've lost hope'. (Mark, 18, Glasgow; 2011)



A GENERATION CONDEMNED TO
poverty, debt & unemployment

A new Precariat class?

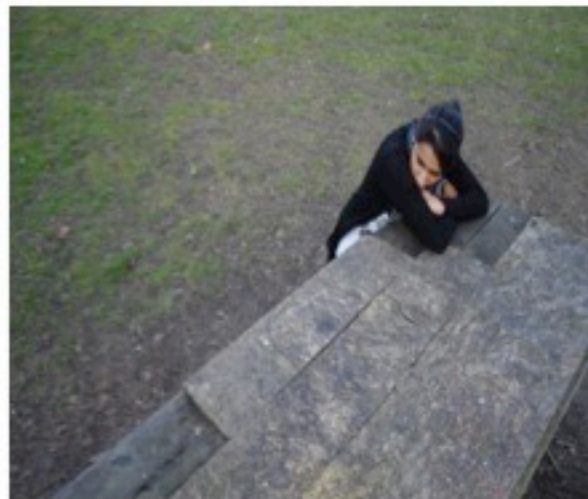
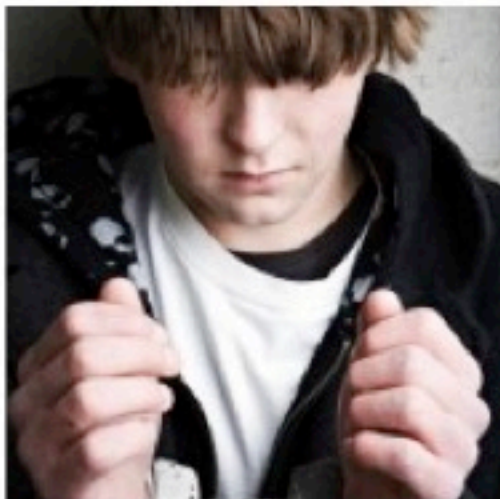
Guy Standing (2011) *The Precariat*



- Neo-liberal, flexible labour markets give rise to *new global class defined by their insecurity of work & life conditions*
- Mass, diverse membership, **with youth at the core of the Precariat** (career-less graduates, migrants, unemployed, the working poor, & insecurely employed)
- Insecurity, **précarité in life**, not just employment, defines youth

The 4 'As' of the Precariat condition...

- **1. Anomie/ 2. Alienation/ 3. Anxiety**
- All featured in our long-term studies of marginalised young adults in Teesside
- **Anxiety** → depression, fatalism, resignation, 'ill-being', suicides (MacDonald & Shildrick, 2013; *Sociology of Health & Illness*)



Austerity & the damage it does...



- *The Body Economic: Why Austerity Kills* (Stuckler & Basu, 2013)
- ‘if austerity were tested like a medication in a clinical trial, it would have been stopped long ago, given its deadly side effects’ .
- Well-known correlation: unemployment & suicide (increases risk x2)
 - 4,750 ‘excess’ suicides in US 2007 to 2010 - result of recession/ fiscal policy
 - No increase in Iceland, which resisted austerity cuts

But, the 4th 'A'?

Where's the Anger?

- Hence, the Precariat as a '**Dangerous Class**'
- But noticeably absent from Teesside Studies
- ...the people Standing cites as indicative of 'The Precariat'
- **This absence is interesting!**
- Suggests many questions...
 - **Turning inwards (anxiety)?**
 - **Turning on neighbours (us & them)?**
 - **Why no riots in Teesside, or Glasgow?**



Young people & politics in the UK

Part 3: The Precariat: 'politics of the inferno'

- In Greece, **Golden Dawn** or **Syriza**?
- Various examples/ auguries available from the UK...



26 million people
in Europe are
looking for work.

And whose jobs
are they after?



TAKE BACK
CONTROL OF
OUR COUNTRY



VOTE UKIP
22ND MAY

ukip.org



Part 3a: Youth & 'politics of the inferno'

The English Riots of 2011



The English Riots of 2011

'Reading the Riots' (JRF 2011)

<http://www.jrf.org.uk/blog/2011/12/riots-challenging-received-wisdom>

- Not (obviously) progressive politics (but here's the anger?)
- **When/ where** = London; other English towns/ cities, Aug. 2011
- **Spark** = police killing of young black man (Mark Duggan)
- **Context** = youth marginalisation; racist policing; poverty/ deprivation; social injustice
- **Rioters** = mainly from deprived boroughs, young (under 30), some gang affiliates, men, used social media to coordinate
- **Motives? [much more disputed]** = challenge unjust/ unfair policing; poverty; consumerism – looting; *an opportunity to kick back*
- **'Rough Justice'**: speedy/ harsh sentencing,
 - e.g. young man (no previous convictions) jailed for 6 months for stealing bottles of water (£3.50)

Part 3b: Youth & 'politics of the inferno' the rise of the Right

- ?Anti-EU, anti-foreigner, anti-Islam, 'Little Englander'...



English Defence League (EDL), Newcastle 2014



'Pegida' in Newcastle, 2015

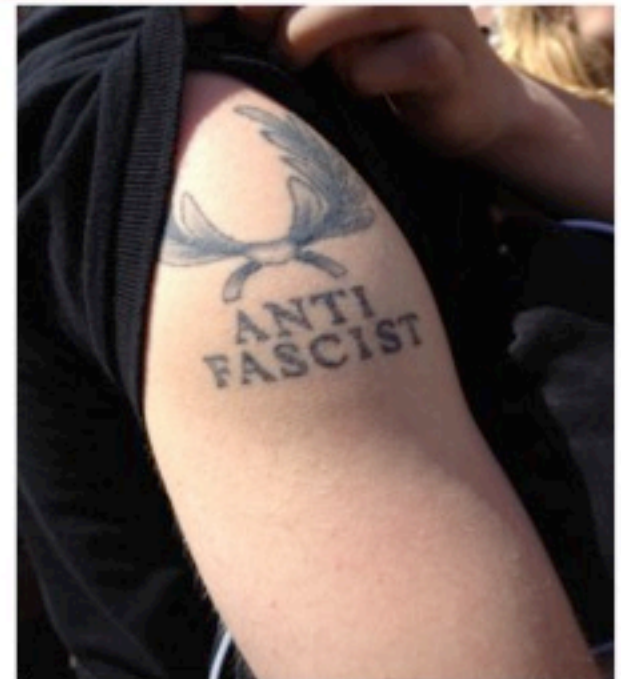


'White Man March' Newcastle 2015



Part 4: Youth & the 'politics of paradise'

4a. Anti-racist, anti-fascist resistance



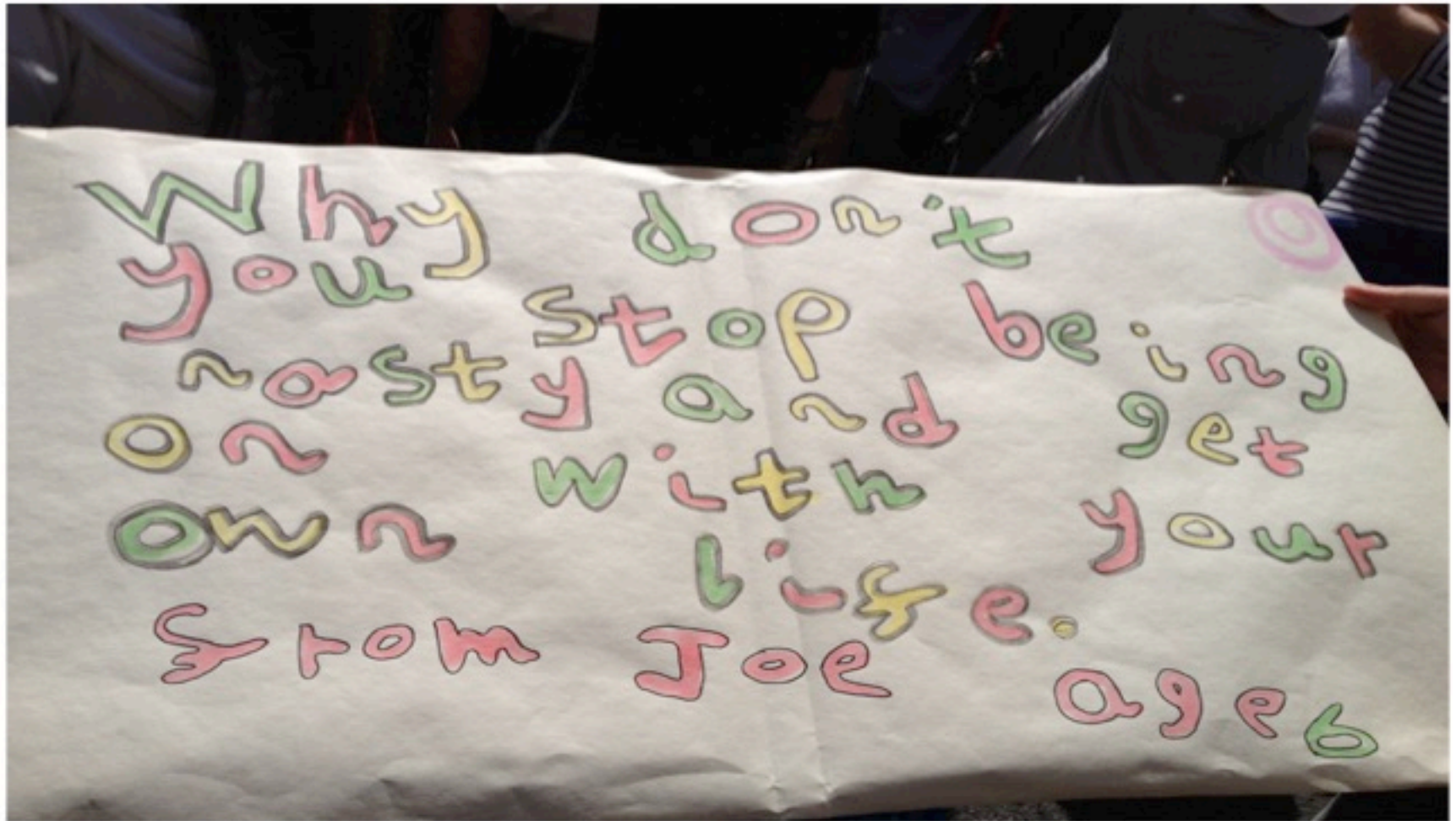
Youth & politics

Anti-racist, anti-fascist resistance



Youth & politics

Anti-racist, anti-fascist resistance



Why don't
you stop being
on your own with
your own life.
Tom Joe aged

Part 4: Youth & the 'politics of paradise'

4b. New pro-social movements

- 'Occupy' / the 1% v the 99%
- 'UK Uncut'
- Précarité in housing, e.g.
 - 'New Era' Estate Tenants
 - 'Poor Doors' campaign
 - 'Reclaim Brixton'



Part 4: Youth & the 'politics of paradise'

4C. Politics invigorated: Scotland

- 86% turnout (highest in UK 1914!)/ 89% of 16/17-years registered
- 71% of 16-17 year olds voted 'yes' (estimate); (27% of 65+s)
- **SNP won 56/ 59 seats 2015 General Election!**
- Progressive, anti-nuclear, anti-austerity, pro-Europe politics; Independence coming?

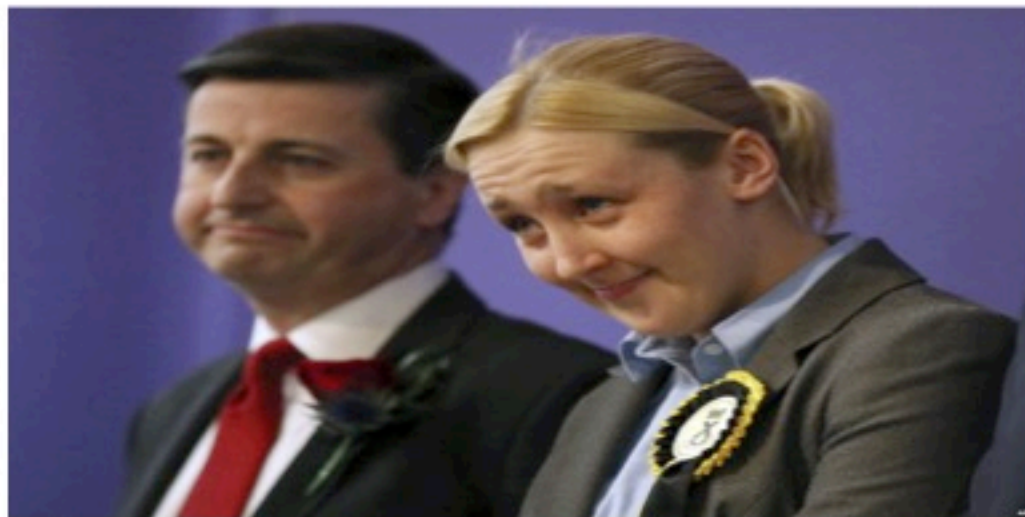


Part 5; Summary & Conclusion

We live in interesting times...

- (Mistaken) tendency to view youth as apathetic
- Lack of engagement better explained in other ways: **ignorance/ distrust/ realism/ individualism/ blame**
- UK youth not as overtly politically animated as counterparts in EU – e.g. **Podemos, Syriza**
- **Potential for new politics**, with increasing precariatization of youth (mass, generational experiences + harsh new pressures)
 - **Politics of the inferno**: street rioting/ looting; the rise of the right (and neo-nazi street movements)
 - **Politics of paradise**: progressive, Leftist politics, for social justice (re: housing), Scottish independence politics

Finally... Youth & Politics



- **Douglas Alexander**, Labour MP, Chief Election Strategist, tipped to be Foreign Secretary (16k+ majority!)
- Versus **Mhairi Black**, SNP, **20 years old** politics student
- **SHE WINS!** (With a 27% swing!) **Youngest MP since 1667.**
- ...interesting times!

thank you for listening

