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ABSTRACT

The study of political activism has neglected people's personal and social relationships to time. Age, life course and generation have become increasing important experiences for understanding political participation and political outcomes (e.g. Brexit), and current policies of austerity across the world are affecting people of all ages. At a time when social science is struggling to understand the rapid and unexpected changes to the current political landscape, the essay argues that the study of political activism can be enriched by engaging with the temporal dimensions of people's everyday social experiences because it enables the discovery of political activism in mundane activities as well as in banal spaces. The authors suggest that a values-based approach that focuses on people's relationships of concern would be a suitable way to surface contemporary political sites and experiences of activism across the life course and for different generations.

Introduction

People's personal and social relationships to time has been a neglected topic of inquiry in the study of political activism. Research at the intersections of political activism, age, life course and generations can be found in diverse disciplinary endeavours but these projects seldom cross paths and have not coalesced into an area of study (Braungart & Braungart, 1986). Yet, such temporal relationships are becoming increasingly important. Age legitimates institutional political participation (e.g. voting) and generational belonging shapes life chances and political activism (Alwin, Cohen, & Newcomb, 1991; Elder, Modell, & Parke, 1993; Hughes, 2015; Moran-Ellis, Bandt, & Sünker, 2014; Pilcher & Wagg, 1996; Wagg & Pilcher, 2014; Weisner & Bernheimer, 1998), as well as shaping election outcomes (Grasso, Farrall, Gray, Hay, & Jennings, 2017). At a time when popular imagination and the research literature continue to be preoccupied with youth as a site of revolt, this essay engages with the experiences of those people not considered to be 'young'. Does an interest in public life, issues of common concern and collective action only emerge during 'youth' and dissipate after 'young adulthood'? Where do 'younger children' and 'older adults' fit within discourses and practices of social and political change?

How does a life course approach to political activism expand the ways in which political activism might be defined? How might political activism across the life course be studied? We argue that bringing questions of people's personal and social relationships to time into conversation with political activism challenges commonly held beliefs and practices about political participation.

These questions also have a contemporary resonance. The consequences of neoliberal socioeconomic policies are affecting people of different age groups across all aspects of their everyday lives, from housing and employment to health and social care. Following almost a decade of austerity policies since the financial crisis of 2008, the electorate in a number of countries is responding in ways that shift the political landscape in unanticipated directions. Age and generational belonging have played a key role in those shifts (e.g. Brexit). At the same time, these social changes are happening to a backdrop of demographic shifts, 'youth bulges' in the Global South and greying populations in the North, which have consequences for individuals, public sector organisation and nation states (e.g. child care; pensions). As such, the conditions that gave rise to the iconic, and formative for many, social movements of the last century (Seidman, 2004), have shifted and so too must the ways we think about the profile of who gets involved in political activism as well as what is valued as political activism.

The contributions to the special issue accompanying this essay emerged from an open call for papers and a workshop, *Activism on the edge of age*, organised by the guest editors and held at the Friends Meeting House in Brighton on 2 and 3 June 2016. At the workshop participants explored the meanings of activism for younger children and older adults, those on either side of 'youth'. We called this being at 'the edges of age'. The themed issue brings together scholars from across the social sciences whose research has been carried out in diverse geographical locations; their contributions to the special issue are all concerned with the ways that age, life course and generations intersects with activism and everyday life.

Notes on 'political activism'

Pippa Norris (2009) defines 'political activism' as 'the ways that citizens participate, the processes that lead them to do so, and the consequences of these acts'. The study of political participation draws on Almond and Verba's (1963) seminal work, *The civic culture*. In disciplinary terms, research on political activism sits at the intersections of political science and psychology. Reading the introduction of Almond and Verba's (1963) classic text it is hard not to be struck by the authors' anxieties, 'that the continental European nations will discover a stable form of democracy in the West' (p. 1), at the same time as finding these anxieties to resonate over 50 years later. Preoccupations with 'the social psychology of participation' (Allport, 1945) and 'the political culture of democracy' (Almond & Verba, 1963, p. 1), emerged in direct response to the rise of Fascism and Communism in the interwar period and the atrocities and aftermath of the Second World War. Pre-occupations with political participation intensified with the subsequent threat of nuclear war and civic disorder that haunted international relations between Eastern and Western blocs following the War and until the early 1990s. From the outset then, the study of political participation has focused on understanding democratic stability and the ways in which psychology (broadly defined) might rule citizens 'through their freedoms, their choices, and their

solidarities' (Rose, 1998, p. 117). In this respect, the 'what' of political participation has been most notably defined in relation to acts that promote stability such as voting, an activity likely to involve the largest number of citizens (Norris, 2009). Campaigning, community organising and protest politics (demonstrations, petitions, strikes) are also identified in the literature as political acts, though ones involving a much smaller number of people.

These political activities have not remained static over time. A number of social changes have occurred over the last century transforming the nature of political participation (Norris, 2009). In Western Democracies voter turnout has declined as has political party membership. How much people participate in public life is contested. On the civic side of public life, there is evidence from the US context that participation in community life has declined over the years (Putnam, 2000). However, the cross-cultural evidence of dwindling participation in traditional associations is more difficult to interpret and there is no easily discernible pattern of increase or decrease in community association in other countries (Norris, 2009). On the political side of public life, it is clearer that 'cause-oriented activism' has risen considerably in various locations around the world as well as transnationally with new social movements becoming an important avenue for political mobilisation (Norris, 2009; Tilly & Tarrow, 2015). These changing civic and political trends have led scholars to re-think the meaning and practices of political participation. Indeed, we would argue that Norris's curation of a number of political acts under the banner of 'political activism' signals in itself, a notable semantic shift in terminology. It is an invitation to engage with the conceptual and empirical ambiguity that the term 'activism' offers (Yang, 2016).

In the last year, the need to re-think how citizens participate in society is also echoed in the soul searching that has started to emerge across the social sciences (Davies, in press; Nielsen, 2016) following the surprise outcomes of the UK General Election 2015, the 2016 UK Referendum of European Membership, and the 2016 US Presidential Elections. Calls are being made for researchers, policy-makers, politicians and the media to engage with other forms of knowledge when it comes to people's politics. For example, Leo Coleman (2016) has suggests that psychoanalysis and ethnography might speak to gaps in current understanding of political participation because they are knowledge traditions which deal with the relationship between our inner and outer worlds as well as being traditions that pay close attention to the details of everyday life.

The call to engage with people's everyday experiences of the social world, if heeded, would result in redefining the categories of politics and activism in unexpected ways. As recent research on new publics (Mahony, Newman, & Barnett, 2010) and new social movement (Bayat, 2010) formation shows, what matters to people, and the dynamics and processes of people coming together over what matters, is largely emergent and unpredictable. It is therefore important that research on political activism (broadly defined) starts to pay closer attention to people's engagement with public life in the round, which Barnett (2014) describes as 'a family of practices of sharing with others'. Barnett argues that any analysis of entanglements with public life must pay close attention to ordinary contexts of everyday life and to seriously consider what matters to people, engaging with what he calls people's 'vocabularies of worth'.

In this respect, values-based definitions of political activism are beginning to emerge (Dave, 2012; Fassin, 2015; Flyvbjerg, 2001; Lambert, 2010). Values-based approaches seek to understand political activism as an assemblage of meanings and practices that

express relationships of concern to the world (Sayer, 2011). Sayer (2011, p. 1) puts it well when he writes about people's relationship to the world as being about the things that matter most to them:

> the most important questions people tend to face in their everyday lives are normative ones of what is good and bad about what is happening, including how others are treating them, and of how to act, and what to do for the best.

In such approaches, researchers have foregrounded the importance of affect and ethics and have formulated an understanding of activism as the subjective experiences of challenging social norms. For example, while the older people whom Jones interviewed in her study on housing (2017) did not self-define as 'activists', many of their housing decisions were underpinned by ethical and affective considerations and their housing choices clearly challenged prevailing normative housing pathways. Conversely, Walker (2017) shows how children's everyday environmental activism at home and at school can be viewed both as experience but also as a social norm, a behaviour that is expected of children and against which they may push back. Activism here can be understood as critique, invention and creative practice which challenges social norms (Dave, 2012). Thinking about political activism in terms of resistance and challenge to social norms allows a broadening of the definition of political participation as a response to that which stifles and suppresses identities and practices which do not conform.

Thinking about personal and social relationships to time: age, the life course and generations

The focus on understanding political activism almost exclusively in terms of voting, coupled with entrenched stereotypes of age and political activity (Andrews, 2017), has resulted in little, if any, serious exploration of the intersections of age, life course, generation and activism. Commonly held beliefs of activism remain closely intertwined with youth. The countercultural revolution of the 1960s in North America and Western Europe, the events of May 1968 in Europe, and student-led responses to repressive political regimes internationally, have contributed to such social imaginaries (Dubinsky, Krull, & Lord, 2009; Hughes, 2015; Seidman, 2004), which continue to be reproduced in youth research, policy and practice (presented co-editors included). Yet, genealogies of care and concern are manifest and can be mobilised in everyday life across all ages, and so the question remains: how do those who are not 'young people' or 'young adults' fit into the imaginary normative distribution of political participation, which sees the onset of political identity in the teenage years and its trailing off at the end of young adulthood?

A useful way to start to answer this question is by looking at a key term for thinking about political participation: 'the citizen' (Dalton, 2009; Norris, 2009). There is a long debate in the social sciences about the many exclusions embedded in this term including exclusions on the grounds of age (see below), gender (Lister, 2003; McAfee, 2000; Roseneil, 2013), racial, ethnic (Hall, 1993) and sexual (Plummer, 2003) identities. Such exclusions are closely linked with disciplinary power dynamics and the central role that psychology and psychoanalysis have played in the modern invention of the self (Rose, 1998; Steedman, 1998). Endeavours to understand the processes of political participation have been underscored by behavioural and functionalist models of personhood (knowledge, attitudes,

behaviours) (cf. Moran-Ellis et al., 2014) that are characteristically a-historical and a-cultural and which interiorise the self.

Such models of personhood have long been critiqued in social psychology, a key intellectual home of 'the science of democracy' (Rose, 1998), as well as elsewhere. In line with theorising in cultural studies, feminism, social constructionism and post-structuralism alike (Fine & Sirin, 2007; Flax, 1990; Gergen, 2011; Griffiths, 1993), socio-behavioural conceptualisations have given way to an understanding of person-hood as configurations of thinking–acting–feeling beings in relationships with others and with their environments. Carolyn Pedwell, drawing on the work of Jane Bennett, calls this 'the mind-body-environment assemblage' (quoted in Pedwell, 2017, p. 95). Values-based approaches to political activism resonate with these relational approaches to understanding people by providing a more inclusive concept of citizen-ship as an affective and ethical relationship between a fluid self and a networked society. Yet, much of this scholarship has remained silent on the relationship between activism and age.

Our thinking in relation to activism and age emerged initially in response limitations in the literature about what political activism meant for younger children; those children in early and middle childhood who are rarely, if ever, thought of in political terms. Cockburn (2013) has argued, children, together with older people, have from ancient times been excluded from definitions of the 'citizen' on account of their competence. This is curious because children's involvement in educational (Ndlovu, 2006) and labour move-ment activism internationally (Liebel, Overwien, & Recknagel, 2001) has been well docu-ment if not always well known. Instead, what this points towards is the historical and cultural specificities of how childhood is constructed at any given time and place, and how these 'constructions' permeate public understandings of children.

Over the last 25 years, representations of children as a-political have been challenged. In particular, the issue of children's competences to participate in matters that concern them has been widely questioned by the children's rights movement and partially over-turned by international conventions (cf. Nolas, 2015 for a review). Nevertheless, the issue of age, as Lister (2007) argues, remains an important consideration in relation to childhood because the arguments for political participation are far more compelling the older a child is; an observation that is supported by empirical evidence (Peterson-Badali, Ruck, & Ridley, 2003). Furthermore, when children are thought of as citizens it is usually as 'citizens-in-waiting', 'learner citizens' or 'apprentice citizens' (Lister, 2007) and not citi-zens in the here-and-now.

To address these conceptual shortcomings, researchers have drawn on feminist theo-rising, in particular ethics of care philosophies developed by Joan Tronto and Carol Gilli-gan, to re-think children's citizenship (Cockburn, 2013). An ethics of care approach challenges the strict and impermeable boundaries between the public and the private found in traditional moral theories. It also challenges the separation of morality from poli-tics. Finally, instead of a top-down, technical and expert view of personhood it advocates for an understanding of people in terms of what matters to them (Cockburn, 2013). Relat-edly, the concepts of 'lived citizenship' (James, 2011; Lister, 2007) and 'living rights' (Hanson & Nieuwenhuys, 2012) have also come to the fore as a way of understanding chil-dren's civil and political experiences in everyday life.

A similar situation can be discerned for older people who, like children, experience dependency and exclusion from the labour market (Craig, 2004). The pathologisation of older people as ill and incapacitated is also well-established (Bytheway, 2005). Higgs (1995) has argued that the erosion of the welfare state and the marketization of public services require a rethinking of social models of citizenship. He concludes that under neo-liberalism older people are more likely to become alienated than they are to be empowered. The media regularly reproduce such representations of older age. Yet, such conclusions do not necessarily hold up in practice. Andrews's (1991) and Jones's (2017) studies referenced earlier precisely challenge ideas of alienation. Equally, Guillemot and Price (2017) document the case of later life politicization in a group of elderly women who had no previous 'habit of responding' to issues of common concern (Andrews, 2017) other than by voting. This group found themselves as first-time protesters to the closure of a charity-run day centre which they all cared deeply about as a space of communion and commensality.

While values-based approaches to political activism have yet to engage with age, these approaches are highly amendable to exploring political activism in relation to age and generation and across the life course. These temporal lived experiences of growing up, getting by and getting on, and of encountering public life in time and over time, open new vistas for thinking about political activism.

Furthermore, looking at 'the edges of age', childhood and older age, together and in relation to activism, enables a reframing of political socialisation as a lifelong process with inter-generational connections. As Guillemot and Price (2017) note, much of the political socialisation literature has confined itself to the study of youth and the influences of home, school and media on their political attitude formation (see also Barassi, 2017; Nolas, Varvantakis, & Aruldoss, 2017b). Important though these influences are known to be (Pancer, 2015), a focus on people's various relationships to time (age, life course, and generation), its experience and passage provides insights into the vicissitudes of life and political activism alike. These are insights that can account for both continuity and change in political orientations (Linden & Klandermans, 2007), the pathways in and out of activism or voluntary action (Fisher, 2012) and/or what Jones (2017) calls 'intermittent activism': the ways in which lives criss-cross 'resonant sites of activism' (Rosen, 2017) (see also Taft, 2017 and Da Silva, 2017).

Resonant sites of activism

While noted to be ambiguous (Yang, 2016), the term activism has been used to refer to high-cost, high-risk protests and revolutionary movements, such as participation in the clandestine militant movements in Portugal (Da Silva, 2017), as well as the everyday practices of environmental protection (Walker, 2017). In relation to such definitions, voting booths, streets, empty buildings and public squares are all familiar sites of political activism. A focus on age, life course and generation, however, expands and introduces new resonant sites of activism. Engaging with people's relationships to and experiences of time forces us to look for and locate activism in diverse sites challenging and expanding commonly held beliefs about political participation. Communities, schools and colleges (Dragonas & Vassiliou, 2017; Katz, 2017), home and family life (Jones, 2017; Walker, 2017), and the internet (Barassi, 2017) all emerge as resonant sites of activism. For

example, Rosen (2017) draws our attention to the playground and children's imaginative play as a site in which gender norms and social inequalities of childhood might be challenged. While Nolas et al. (2017b) demonstrate how the everyday spaces of the home can be transformed into temporary *agoras* for political oration.

These resonant sites suggest that a temporal engagement with political activism moving forward will also require an engagement with the impossible geometries of the public–private–personal–political. Feminists have long argued that the personal is political. More recently, political economist Will Davies (in press) has suggested that as: '[public life] becomes corrupted, [sociology] must delve further into the private realm in search of some future public'. Meanwhile, research on political talk supports the idea that conversations of a political and public nature require the most intimate and trusting of private spaces and personal relationships in order to be aired (Nolas et al., 2017b). The public and the private, the personal and the political are not just analytical counterparts to be explored and experimented with. As digital technologies accelerate and make visible experiences of 'context collapse' (Marwick & boyd, 2011) it will become necessary to relinquish the idea that political activism occupies only one 'proper' place (de Certeau, 1984). Instead, it might be more productive to think about political activism as mobile and fluid practices that cut across variously connected 'mind-body-environment assemblage' that are at once public and private, personal and political.

Encountering activism over time

How might political activism across the life course be studied? Much of the research on activism is limited in its geographical (mostly western) and methodological (survey methods) breadth (Norris, 2009; Sapiro, 2004; Schmitt-Beck & Lup, 2013). Action-oriented and comparative design approaches are starting to emerge in the literature, and will be necessary going forward in order to move beyond the over-represented, in the political participation literature, U S and the tendency for single-country study designs (Norris, 2009). For example, reflections on an action research educational intervention for language learning and youth inclusion over a 20-year period (1997-to date) in the multi-cultural borderland of North-Eastern Greece (Dragonas and Vassiliou, 2017) reveals the ways in which intergroup relationships are historically sedimented and explores how they can be locally reconfigured through dialogue and joint activities. Research on political activism also has started to take a comparative approach by, for example, contrasting experiences across European and South Asian societies (Barassi, 2017; Nolas et al., 2017b; Walker, 2017). Such cross-national conversations contextualise political experiences allowing for commonalities and differences across cultures to emerge that challenge universalising notions of both politics and participation (Nolas, Varvantakis, & Aruldoss, 2017a; 2017b).

Barassi (2017) argues that much of the literature on political activism has to-date neglected the biographical aspects of how activism comes about. Research and everyday understandings of political activism rely heavily on the tropes of programmatic and spectacular moments (Dave, 2012) tending to ignore, for instance, the narrative imagination, the lived experience and the storied life (Andrews, 2014) which we find to be of great significance for a nuanced understanding of political activism. By contrast life history and biographical methods produce rich narrative analyses of the range of stories that activists tell about themselves and their activism. Indeed, as Da Silva (2017), and others (Taft, 2017)

have argued narrative itself becomes a resource for making sense and reflecting on one's activism. Meanwhile, ethnographic approaches and the practice of spending time in the field enable researchers to capture children and adults' fleeting and ephemeral encounters with public life such as in the case of political talk in the home (Nolas et al., 2017b).

These methodological approaches give rise to questions around the relationships between commitment and intermission and the ways in which everyday life and familial obligations might intervene to disrupt old, as well as generate new trajectories of activism. For example, Andrews (2017), reflecting on her seminal life history research on the political commitment of a group of older, white British socialist (1991) suggests that maintaining political commitment depends on cultivating a 'habit of responding'. Pedwell (2017) has recently argued that habits are not just mindless repetition that sustains the status quo. They are also the sustained action required once consciousness has been raised and altered as thinking–acting–feeling bodies interact with their environments. In both readings, habits require time to form and to be recognised as such. This processual view of activism helps us to understand how activism comes about and unfolds over time.

Importantly, such research approaches that engage with people's relationship to time (temporality) allow us to move beyond a (largely imaginary and largely empty) singular moment of *enrolment*, in which one's activism 'switches on'. Instead, we can begin to see the political/activist identity as something that is nuanced through time, that is both cultural and social, that has a history and a future, and which is also fluid and flexible in response to changes and interpretations over time. Additionally, an in-depth ethnographic orientation allows for a more nuanced understanding of aspects of the political in everyday life (families, talk, storytelling, discussion, online narratives, etc) and takes us beyond the spectacular moments of social action. Thus, such methodological (and epistemological) views, we would argue, assist to substantiate a more *political* political science (Schram, Flyvbjerg, & Landman, 2013).

Conclusion

In the study of political activism people's personal and social relationships to time have received scarce attention. Stereotypes of age and generational belonging have been instrumental in maintaining a research agenda that largely ignores the experiences of the very young or the very old and diversity of experience within generations. Yet recent political developments, and life course research, suggest that relationship to time is an important social category and lived experience which shapes political outcomes as much as political participation.

The concepts of age, life course and generation bring in aspects of time to the study of political activism. In this essay, we have called for a more open and inclusive approach to political activism that accounts for the hitherto overlooked experiences at the edge of age. We have reviewed a number of research examples which challenged the notion that only young people or young adults are politically active in an institutional sense. The literature reviewed for this essay provides research examples of encounters with public life and political participation from as young as four (Rosen, 2017) to as old as 92 (Guillemot & Price, 2017). Thinking about personal and social relationships to time not only broadens our notions of who might be a citizen, it also forces us to look at citizenship relationally in the context of family life and friendships groups. People of all ages are interdependent

on each other, yet these inter-dependencies are most visible on the edges of age. Thinking about activism through the prism of age forces us to engage with the times and places in which those inter-dependencies unfold as people make sense of their living and dining arrangements, as they play and talk, go to school and go online.

Our understanding of political activism has been influenced by values-based literatures. Values-based approaches seek to understand political activism as a configuration of meanings and practices that express relationships of concern to the world (Sayer, 2011). Accordingly, we highlighted the ways in which the understanding of political activism could be enriched through granular, qualitative research approaches, such as life history, ethnographic and action research methods all of which engage to a greater or lesser extent with time. Stories that surface 'habits of responding' (Andrews, 2017) help to challenge the commonly held belief that activism is always something spectacular and remarkable and the exclusive purview of youth. Instead, by engaging with the pasts, presents and imagined futures of activism, we discover that political activism can be found in mundane activities as well as in banal spaces. Such methodological diversity in the scientific enquiry of political activism contributes a more nuanced understanding of individual biographies and cultural and historical contexts in which political activism takes place.

The special issue that follows this essay brings together a number of themes and ideas that have not typically been associated with political activism. It is our hope that the collection of papers make a modest, initial contribution towards an interdisciplinary social science that engages with the cares and concerns of people across the life course, who live in and through different circumstances, generations and geographical locations.

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Notes on contributors

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