

Changing life courses, new media, and citizenship

The impact of the reflexive biographization of the life course on young people's democratic engagement

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Nishinomiya, Japan, July 2004

Paper prepared for the Seminar 'Young Citizens and New Media. Strategies for Learning Democratic Engagement', September 24-25, 2004, Research School LearnIT and Media and Communication Studies at Lund University, Lund, Sweden

Abstract

Social scientists converge on the opinion that life courses have significantly changed in the last few decades. The emergence and the diffusion of the de-standardized life course in advanced societies are accepted facts among social scientist. Relatively new in the debate is the phenomenon of the 'reflexive biographization' of the life course. This paper addresses some causes and consequences of this phenomenon and aims to show that it may lead to the rise of a reflexive generation. Members of this generation, especially through new media with which they are most comfortable, that allow them to be more autonomous and that may signal their membership of a global youthful community, give voice to their unique history and destiny, being one in which the continuous quest for changes and challenges, also as regards their citizenship and democratic engagement, is prominent. Evidence for these developments is partly based on a series of Dutch life course studies, but mostly on theoretical assertion. The paper therefore aims to suggest a future agenda for empirically studying the issues at stake.

De-standardized life courses

Life courses are about discrete transitions in people's lives, e.g. the transition from school to work, from childless life to parenthood, from being excluded to being able to vote. Life courses are perhaps the most sociological of social constructions (Kalmijn, 2002). They are the 'bridging vehicles' of different social domains of life and the individual. Life course transitions refer to changes in people's social relationships. For instance, as Kalmijn (2002) argues, if there are life course effects on people's beliefs and attitudes or on their life chances, this shows that changes on these domains are related to the people

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with which they interact, in other words, to the social relationships, either strong or weak, they have. It all centers around the basic idea of how people are influenced by others. The most prominent issue in life course sociology is the balance between structure and agency or between different level contexts (institutional pathways and social aggregates) on the one hand and action on the other hand (Elder, 1998; Furlong & Cartmel, 1997).² Life course studies are likely to stress the pre-structured world in which people function. That is, the world of life course regimes (or cultural scripts, norms and rules on what an ideal life course model is, as well as the number, nature, and timing of transitions), of abstract institutions and concrete organizations that ‘write’ these scripts (such as the educational framework and the concrete school), of social categorizations (gender, age, education, social status, etc.) that determine the options open to people in the life course, of ‘endogenous structuring’ being the previous steps in the life course that impact which the possible next ones one can take (the so-called path-dependencies in the life course), and also interpersonal ties that show how life course of one individual depends on the life course of others, especially those who are close to the individual (see also Diepstraten, forthcoming). There is a less well-developed eye in these studies for the extent to which individuals shape their life course and in doing so in turn impact the structures or change – however minor this change may be – the pre-structured world in which they function.

Life course regimes, as Mayer (2001, 2004) puts it, have changed fundamentally. During the late industrial or ‘Fordist-welfare state phase’ (from 1955 to around 1973), that life courses became standardized, with a male breadwinner, with a nuclear family and early marriage, with standardized transitions, with also distinct life phases of schooling, (stable contract) employment and retirement, with covered risks (sickness, disability, old age), with a linear increase in wages and savings over the life course, and with, from a subjective point of view, a life course orientation directed at progression and accumulation and at conformity to a (gendered) division of roles both in the public and private sphere. Identities in this ideal type life course regime description were stable and well-defined or, perhaps better, one-dimensional, e.g. either private or public. In the post-industrial or post-Fordist life course regime we witness increasing differentiation and heterogeneity as transitions are delayed, prolonged and increased in age variance. Interruptions in education and work are normal, are even part of the institutional framework in which periods of on-the-job learning, other types of a time-out (to give care at home or in the wider family or ‘to travel the world’), and temporary job contracts are regulated. Work itself is not stable, not in terms of lifelong commitments to one type of

² See also Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, for an overview of sociological theories of agency and the balance with structure.

job or employer and not in terms of guaranteed cumulative progressive growth, we found in a study within the Dutch context (Ester & Vinken, 2000, 2001). Collective social provisions including the pension entitlements at a certain age are under threat. The late-industrial clear-cut gender roles are, at least at the cultural level, contested. It is regarded a normal if not compulsory choice for women to work lifelong. Diverting from this working woman ideal (and 'just' playing the housewife) is a choice that is hard to uphold, combining an occupation with a family life in reality is even harder as the gender roles in contemporary families and in government policies (only reluctantly investing in daycare facilities in some societies for instance) is far from modern. Finally, we also found that with the rise of ICT and the 24 hour society distinctions between work and non-work time are blurred, of course influencing the very idea of a transition from non-working live to working life and to again non-working life (Ester & Vinken, 2000, 2001; Vinken & Ester, 2001).

Opinions among life course sociologists converge, with most of these sociologists agreeing with the idea that during the last three decades life courses in late-modern societies have de-standardized (e.g., Fuchs, 1983; Held, 1986; Kohli, 1985; Mayer, 2000, 2001, 2004; Heinz & Marshall, 2003). Especially the traditional three-phased life course model of first a period of preparation and education, then a time of work and family life, and then, finally, years of rest and disassociation from society is believed to have lost ground in these societies. Life courses have changed. In terms of timing it is clear that some people postpone many transitions (e.g., having children) while they experience certain transitions earlier and earlier (e.g., having intimate relationships). The sequential order of transitions is changing as well, so it seems, for instance when we see people starting a full-time study after having retired, having children before being married, or having a 'real' job before having finished full education. Moreover, transitions seem to have become 'reversible': choices people have made are revoked and replaced by other choices: e.g. after a short career, some 'realize' that becoming a student (again) might be more rewarding. Combined, the result is that contemporary people experience transitions at different moments in time and thus that at any given moment in time more people of similar ages are in very different life phases.³

This paper aims to build on the sociological ideas of the de-standardization of the life course, focus at some recent developments, especially as regards the concept of

³ Some label the process of diverting from the linear and accumulative logic of life course transitions – stacking experiences as a necessary condition to be able to make and process new experiences in the life course – as the 'yoyo-ization' of the life course (Pais, 1995, Walther & Stauber, 2002) in which one combines and exchanges roles at a specific moment that once belonged uniquely to one or the other life course phase.

reflexive biographization of the life course, and will address the key consequences of these developments for young people's ideas on citizenship and for their democratic engagement. Generation formation and new media, as will be discussed below, are crucial in the process. This paper hopes to lay out some elements that may help to draw up a future research agenda particularly for empirical studies into democratic engagement of young people that take into account that young people today live in another world, a world in which life courses are de-standardized and biographized and a world therefore that demands engagement in a wide variety of life domains using new tools and new platforms.

Reflexive biographization

One of the leading figures in youth sociology in Germany, Jürgen Zinnecker (2000, 2002), argues that the formal pedagogic environment of young people is irrelevant for young people in their process of growing adult. Young people are productive reality-addressing subjects in their own right and to be so they do not need interactions with the formal, direct or wider social environment. This environment, this formal and more indirect social world of teachers, counselors, advisors, and representatives of any institution with a pedagogic agenda (ranging from political parties to the police) are not in touch with young people, are disconnected to modern-day young people and have, willingly or not, retreated in the world of young people much so in favor of the self and the peer group of age contemporaries. By themselves and with these peers they filter every socialization effort by those outside circles, including those with an official pedagogic assignment, Zinnecker argues. For long Zinnecker is known for his warm pleas for the importance of youth cultures (Zinnecker, 1987) and youth cultural attitudes (including the so-called attitude of youth centrism; see Zinnecker, and see Vinken, 1997) in young people's lives. Still, for many years the generally accepted idea of socialization was that youth cultures were just one, though an important one, of the informal and formal worlds that played a role in socialization; the others being the family, intimate friends (partners, spouses), formal educators, and, of course, the media. In interaction with these informal and formal circles people develop abilities to address reality productively, as a classic perception of socialization goes (Hurrelman, 1983, 2002). Moreover, the central perception of the aim of socialization until recently was that full integration into society resulted in the development of a personal self and identity (the basic human development idea of individuation through social integration). Zinnecker, however, states that contemporary socialization is purely self-directed and predominantly dealing with self-realization and can therefore be framed as a process of 'self-' instead of

'other-socialization'. Others, and if we follow Zinnecker precisely, especially others from formal circles with pedagogic agendas, are of no importance.⁴

Support for this subject-oriented viewpoint of socialization is provided by the emphasis another German social scientist Hermann Veith (2002) puts on the changing focus of socialization and on what he coins as the process of reflexive biographization of the life course.⁵ Socialization, he argues, is no longer a matter of *Vergesellschaftung*, meaning individuation by social integration. It is reversed and can only be understood as a process of subjective option-observation by individuals imagining their own path and self-directed route to integrate in society and live the future-life they feel like living. In other words, the aim, nature, and meaning of socialization shifted from developing individuality by taking part in society to, regardless of 'real' participation, developing competences to imagine one's own future and to imagine one's personal choices from the seemingly ever growing number of options to participate in society. Reasoning from the process of individualization this shift in socialization may seem plausible. For, in individualizing societies classic institutions and their representatives seem unable, or at least highly reluctant, again, at least on the surface in their communications towards younger people, to determine, direct and control the choices young people (should) make. The emphasis is put on first developing individuality, building self-esteem and personality, discovering one's true inner self, unraveling one's own unique motives, before making definite choices and especially before making one's that pin people down on a certain irreversible trajectory. The point is not that this is not the whole story and that it denies that people are directed, determined and controlled by institutions (e.g. the school, church, family, neighborhood), undergo true-felt constraints from the real social categorizations they are part of (class, gender, education), and are dependent on previous choices they themselves and the ones they interact with have made (the so-called 'path' and 'other'-dependencies in the life course), but that people, at least in individualizing societies, are increasingly less willing to acknowledge and value these types of outside control, direction, and determination. Interpreting and legitimizing one's choices with this outside dependency perspective is what runs against the culture of individualism (Elchardus, 1999).

⁴ Even with Zinnecker there is some room for socialization not being purely self-directed, as it are particularly formal educators who are absent (and are apparently playing the major role in 'other-socialization') and it are informal, intimate circles if not also the media as an institution (especially new media, see Vinken, 2004) still playing a role in 'self-socialization'.

⁵ Of course, there is an abundance of critique to the notion of Zinnecker: see Vinken, 2004 for a short overview and see for the full debate *Zeitschrift für Soziologie der Erziehung und Sozialisation*, Volume 22, Issue 2.

Still, not explicitly acknowledging these points, Veith continues and argues that the consequence of the changing focus of socialization is that the life course undergoes what he terms a 'reflexive biographization'. People's biography, or their individual paths thru life, has become the central theme on which people focus in their life course. Again, not per se participation in society, taking up different roles in life itself, is central, but the projection of one's future biography, one's plans for one's future, the options themselves that one may or may not explore, the consequences as well of choosing any of the multitude of options, these are the themes that take up the bulk of energy people spent today. To put it in modernist dichotomous terms: in modern, late-industrial days people participated in society (got work, got married, got children, etc.) and by doing that learned to project next steps in life, became aware of the plan of life that revealed itself before their own eyes, and were confronted with the consequences of choices they made or forgot to make. This way they learn what it is they want from life (and what they rather had had from life) and what their own strong and weak points are or what their own individuality in life is. In late-modern, post-Fordist days people seem to first focus on who they are, or better, who they want to become, to focus on making a list first of both these weak and strong points, to try to predict consequences of choices they want and they not want to make, to have explored an overall plan of life, before even participating. Participation (work, marriage, parenthood and citizenship) itself is postponed, in other words, or, and I will get back to this later, participation is at best seen as a temporary 'challenge' as long as it is of the type that keeps options to again other, new, yet unimagined forms of participation open.

Reflexivity, one could argue more or less in line with Beck (1994), is first of all a process of self-confrontation with the unplanned, unmanageable, unintended and therefore seems to build much more on non-knowledge (what we don't know) than on knowledge (what we know).⁶ This differentiation is relevant for the idea of reflexivity competences. Investments in planning, organizing, evaluating and re-adjusting one's life course are likely to deal with just that part of one's history that is hardest to grasp in the first place: the unknown of one's future life course. Reflexivity competences, hence, not only include abilities or skills such as planning, evaluation or adjustment, but also the capacity to continuously monitor one's thoughts and actions, to test and retest how one is doing at any given moment and thus to look at and validate one's initial grounds and reasons for one's thoughts and actions again, to reformulate these and to change these if

⁶ Beck (1994) much more focuses on institutional level when discussing reflexivity, not explicitly rejecting the idea that reflexivity is a process at work at other levels as well, but only giving relatively attention to these other levels (see also Giddens, 1991; Lash 1994).

necessary given new information or changed circumstances. The need, urge and ability to stay constantly in touch with one's thoughts and actions results in a knowledge creating process, but more and more so under the well-recognized condition that one's knowledge horizon will always fall short in the acknowledgement that one's life course as well as one's competences will never be definitely finalized and fully developed. Moreover, probably as is the case at the meso- and macro-levels, the basic principle of reflexivity at the individual level is self-destruction. People therefore, one can argue, should be able or at least willing to abruptly part from a given route in their biography and take on a completely new one, leaving everything behind and taking nothing with them, more or less in the fashion of the much famed and feared scorched earth military policy. The late modern life narrative is therefore more like a set of seemingly unrelated short stories of unexpected and unplanned twists and turns into an unknown if not unknowable future, than it is an account of one chain of well-designed, well-planned, logically associated and neatly stacked life events.

Reflexive biographization of the life course itself is a process resulting from forces of structure and agency.⁷ On the one hand, people, young or old, are increasingly forced to take their lives in their own hands, are thus led in the direction of a more biographized life course, and are more and more required to develop reflexive competences. On the other hand, people, of any age but perhaps more so among young people, are seeking ways to control their own particular future by themselves, thus focusing on their own biography more and more and investing in developing reflexive competences more and more.

Reflexive generation

Before linking the phenomenon of reflexive biographization to new media and democratic engagement, let me first dwell shortly on the generational perspective. This perspective in sociology builds on *reflexivity*. The reflexivity of those who, in their formative years, have experienced disruptive socio-historical events or discontinuous change in society, is central in sociological view of generations. It was Karl Mannheim (1928/1929), who first framed generations in a sociological way. It is surprising to note that present-day sociology, including youth sociology, has drifted away from his notions, that is, from the purely *sociological* notions of generations. Moreover, though the generational perspective is widely used in many value and life chance studies,

⁷ Lash (1994: 119-135) also reflects on the balance between agency and structure and seems to bend towards the concept of structures forcing agency to be free, e.g. the labor market forcing people to be flexible workers.

methodologically the ‘intergenerational’ in these studies is usually analyzed by comparing different birth cohorts. A crucial sociological notion emphasized by Karl Mannheim has been lost along the way. It is the notion that a generation is not simply a numerical clustering of birth cohorts, but a group of contemporaries who share a sense of *belonging* to a generation. They share this because they experienced common societal events and circumstances that marked their formative period and that had lasting effects on their individual life courses. From a sociological perspective, birth cohorts as such are not equivalent to generations. A consciousness of the shared history and destiny is a necessary condition if a generation is to emerge, a generational consciousness that separates one generation from the others. The sociological concept of generations originally refers to individuals who think of themselves as members of a generation and who (either implicitly or explicitly) express the extent to which this sense of belonging leads to unique experiences and endeavors further on in the life course (see Diepstraten et al., 1999).

The Mannheimian conceptualization of a generation stresses that a generation is not a mere statistical birth cohort. To begin with, a generation refers to individuals who are born in the same historical period, who live in the same socio-cultural space, and are aware of sharing similar experiences in their formative years. This conceptualization presupposes that generation members subjectively identify with their generation, are linked by a common biography, have an elementary sense of a joint destiny and of being different from other generations. Generation membership assumes generation *consciousness* and a cognizance that one’s generation is *distinct* from other generations. Generation membership thus depends on the subjective views of people in a particular social and historical setting. Analytically this implies that objective and subjective aspects should both be taken into account in empirical generation research. Much of the generation research aims at assessing intergenerational differences by only examining differences between birth cohorts. A *subjective comparative* approach is needed to do justice to Mannheim’s theory on the origins and emergence of generations. All things considered, this means that from a sociological point of view, birth cohorts are at best generation locations but by implication do not represent an actual generation.

The biographization of the life course, including the phenomena of self-direction (the individual as the stage director of its own biography) and self-directedness (the pre-occupation with one’s self, the focus at self-actualization), is not taking place in a social void. Especially intimate circles and the media are believed to have impact (Zinnecker 2000, 2002). This is also what was clearly established in a career orientation study among Dutch people aged 40 years and younger (Vinken et al., 2002, 2003; Vinken, 2004). It shows that Dutch young people (aged less than 30 and compared to those aged 30 to 40)

are well aware of the wide range of life course options, possible transitions, and accompanying life course cultures (orientations and aspirations related to particular choices). Any type of career path, it was also found, seemed to have their support. Other than for thirty-something people, in other words, there was not a single career path for these younger people that they preferred more or preferred less: every option was fine. What was clear, instead, was their choice for a 'dynamic life course model', a model which is directed not at progress (getting ahead) or self-development (broadening one's capabilities) per se, but directed at variation, change, and continuous challenges. At the same time, at least as far as their future career life within this dynamic life course model goes, their prime supporters are people, and only people from the direct social circle of intimates (partners and spouses, and to a lesser extent parents and peers).⁸ Professional educators, teachers, career consultants and others with an explicit pedagogic agenda are absolutely absent in the career life course perceptions of young people. Only with their direct confidants they evaluate, plan, negotiate, and project their life course, a life course aimed at dynamics as an end *an sich*, a type of life course, therefore in turn, promoting the continuous process of reflexivity with close associates.

This is of course as Zinnecker, mentioned above, would have predicted, at least as far as the role of the pedagogically inclined outside world for young people goes. It is also a forceful indication of what was labeled as the reflexive biographization of the life course. That young people feel like pursuing any type of career path and are predominantly favoring a life course of variation, change, challenges may serve as indications that they have a strong preference to keep as many options open as possible as well as perceive their life course and participation in general more as some sort of an adventure consisting of temporary commitments, and, more importantly, of unplanned, unpredictable, and yet uncertain but probably exciting events (Du Bois-Reymond, 1998). Of course, the rejection of outside control or even support is also in line with the reasonings related to the reflexive biographization of the life course. These young people claim to take their own control over their own life and believe to be able to deal with the challenges (and the uncertainties and difficulties) themselves, again, not completely on their own, but with their intimates and certainly not with societies' pedagogically inspired representatives. With this company they will, over the total life course, develop a common consciousness of a shared history and destiny, a history and destiny in which autonomously, but with the help of close relatives, directing the dynamics of one's

⁸ The role of partners and spouses reminds us of the large impact of interpersonal tie dependencies of life courses, life courses that are directly dependent of the life courses of the most direct intimates in people's lives, as also Mayer (2000, 2001) argues.

biography is and persists to be the central issue. This might result in the rise of a ‘*reflexive generation*’, not only *having* formative experiences regarding their relationship with their life course that are fundamentally different from the experiences of the previous generations, but also – and necessarily so, given the rise of the reflexive biographization of their life course – *being aware* of the distinctiveness of their formative experiences and acting according to this awareness.

New media and citizenship

Based on theoretical assertion and some indications from (Dutch) life course studies one may predict that in advanced societies, many of which have developed de-standardized life course regimes, young generations are formed that, more or less without any outside interference of pedagogically inspired institutions, engage in the imagination of a life course of continuous changes and challenges. New media, especially communication technologies such as mobile platforms and Internet platforms, are crucial in the process. There is, as I aim to show below, reason to believe that these life course changes and these new media are a powerful mix that redefines young generation’s notion of citizenship and their way of learning democratic engagement. It is important to analyze these suggested relationships without disgressing in unfounded optimistic views on the blessings of the good young ‘digital generation’ (cf. Howe & Strauss, 2000; Tapscott, 1999) or the equally unfounded and almost malicious negative perspectives of the ‘anticivic’ post-babyboom generation (cf. Putnam, 2000; see for comments on both views Ester & Vinken, 2003; Vinken, 2004). The below mentioned can be seen as an attempt to do so.

In general, first of all, Zinnecker makes an important point in his assessments on self-socialization on the role of consumption and media use. Says Zinnecker (2000: 277): “*(Dass die) Instanzen des Marktes, des Konsums (...) den Kindern und Jugendlichen andere Formen der Beteiligung anbieten und auch abverlangen, als es die kleinräumig-nachbarschaftlichen Milieus der Erwachsenengesellschaft taten*”. Through consumption and media use by young people (both children and adolescents) their traditional status of civic incapability (the idea of being a ‘minor’ itself) is transferred into, if not replaced by a model of equal competence of action. Especially the domains of leisure and consumption therefore promotes self-socialization, or better still in my opinion, the socialization of the self with the help of contemporaries, being Zinnecker’s peers or, as have shown above, being generation co-members aware of their shared history and destiny. Using new media and more in general engaging in leisure and consumption young people are, virtual or real, perhaps fuller members of their community. In these

domains they are no longer 'minors', but to the contrary highly admired 'experts', if not somewhat mistrusted geeks who mysteriously seem to outplay adults with their speed of adopting and playing with new technologies. More than the model of equal competence of action, as Zinnecker suggests, a model of a higher competence of action seems to apply.

This 'higher' competence is interesting in reference to concepts of citizenship. A minimal perception of citizenship (Evans, 1995) emphasizes that citizenship is gained when civil and legal status is granted. The mobile and Internet platforms on which young people are regarded more competent ignore the real-life limitations that accompany minimal citizenship. A maximal citizenship definition underlines that people define themselves as members of society. It refers to the consciousness of seeing oneself as a member of a shared democratic culture and can be said to even include questions of reflexivity and responsibility-taking. This definition of course emphasizes participatory approaches and considers ways to overcome the social disadvantages that undermine citizenship by denying full participation in society. Yet, education for citizenship usually builds on minimal citizenship requiring 'only induction into basic knowledge of institutionalized rules of rights and obligations. Maximal interpretations require education which develops critical and reflective abilities and capacities for self-determination and autonomy.' (Evans, 1995: 5). Citizenship is defined in terms of its formal aspects, such as voting for representatives and decision-making which is deferred to adults, requiring only passive participation or acknowledgement on the part of young people. Moreover, it builds on the assumption that education is preparing young people to have the skills and understandings they will need *in the future* as citizens. It tends to focus on political and civic elements in citizenship, in which 'the objectives should be to enable young people to discharge formal obligations of citizenship such as voting and compliance with laws' (Civics Expert Group, 1994:6). To the extent that it remains within this framework, citizenship education offers only a minimal interpretation of citizenship. The effect of this approach can be counterproductive:

Learning about democracy and citizenship when I was at school was a bit like reading holiday brochures in prison. Unless you were about to be let out or escape, it was quite frustrating and seemed pointless (Hannam, 2000).

Minimal citizenship education as well as many institutions perceive youths as 'deficit' (incomplete and immature) versions of adults and impose an adult-centred view of appropriate involvement in which young people have had no role in determining.

Maximal definitions emphasizing the role individuals play in forming, maintaining and changing their communities perceive young generations as already valuable and valued citizens (see also Bynner et al., 1997).

The mismatch of a minimal definition of citizenship with the de-standardized and biographized life course reality of contemporary younger generations and with their engagement in new media platforms almost needs no further comment. Especially so when we refer to a broader definition of citizenship and focus at the ‘public’ in the sense of referring to the public cause, striving for public acknowledgement, seeking to legitimise one’s actions with arguments from the public sphere, and identifying with, participating in and taking responsibility in public life. This connects citizenship to ‘public’ issues much in line with reputed thought on the issue of ‘public discourse’ stating that ...public discourse must be thought of in terms broader than those of political debate alone. Its essential concern is with the collective, not necessarily in the sense of the entire society, but with the relationships among individuals, between individuals and communities, and among communities. Public discourse – or what is often referred to as the public sphere – is thus the arena of questions about the desirable in social conduct: How shall we live as a people? What do we hold as priorities? To what ends shall we allocate our time, our energy, our collective resources? Where do we locate hope? How do we envision the good? (Wuthnow, 1991: 22-23). In this processes young generations are involved as well and perhaps even more so under the reign of de-standardized and biographized life course regimes.⁹ As stated, these regimes increasingly and continuously require them to reflect on their (future) positions in a wide range of domains in society, not only as regards education, work or family life, but also as regards citizenship and democratic engagement (as well as concerns leisure and consumption, another key domain, as is argued further below). Classic minimal definition based institutions and ditto forms of participation are not at par with this life course reality mainly because paradoxically, considering the key issue of choice for instance in the process of voting, they do not include agency. They represent a pre-determined world from which one is either excluded on legal grounds if one is too young or can follow pre-given route of participation in a voting process or a political (party) organization. Furthermore, commitment to this type of participation, usually requiring a ‘long march’ through these institutions (starting as a freshman-member, climbing up in the organizational hierarchy and being allowed to represent issues in these organizations after a few years, in the

⁹ There is an interesting recent example of relating changes in the transitions to adulthood to citizenship (Thomson et al., 2004). However, the report on this qualitative study does not dwell much on young people’s attitudes and behaviors referring to issues of the public cause and does not provide information on the role of new media in the process.

process aligning with party strategies at the expense of individual identity, etc.) is, to put it mildly, most probably only weakly experienced as a form of action that allows for change and challenges. Non-organizational engagement, in other words, is more likely to be preferred and especially engagement that allows one for changeable and challenging commitments. The mobile and Internet platforms, one may argue, may well provide these types of commitment.¹⁰

Scholarly literature on the Internet seems to suggest that at least Internet may serve this role as it has strong ties to the basic cultural, social, and political characteristics of contemporary society (see Ester & Vinken, 2003). The Internet emerges from these characteristics of today's society as well as strongly contributes to them. *Culturally*, today's society provides space for autonomous construction of meaning and builds on individuals who function within multiple cultures. The Internet is a constitutive force as it precisely adds to these features. It allows for the creation of multiple identities and symbolization of selves in a setting where no culture is dominant. In which, in other words, the individual can imagine a future of a continuously changeable and challenged self. *Socially*, contemporary society and its permeable institutions allows and demands people to develop partial commitments, establish 'weak tie' relationships and to combine diverse sets of social identities and roles based on shared interests more than on social categorizations. The Internet, in turn, is the space that promotes and pressures people to connect and disconnect relationships at high speed, to experience heterogeneity in these relationships, and indulge in supportive environments and communities without social burdens or inhibiting social cues. In other words, it allows the individual to engage in relationships and community life without running the risk of making irreversible commitments; commitments that would impede on the desired openness and changeability of one's life course. *Politically*, present-day society confronts the citizen with a wide variety of agencies and organizations (political movements, parties, and interest groups) each with divergent repertoires of action and political expression, and each targeted to influence a diversified set of political actors. Internet, in turn, offers the alternative avenues of engagement. It may function as a public sphere, as a tool for boosting real life politics, as well as a new reality in itself. The Internet is, as argued, probably functioning more as an alternative reality, benefiting non-mainstream political actors, when political culture is less open for alternative political views. Therefore, the Internet can function as the ultimate alternative route to democratic engagement

¹⁰ One must be aware that good internationally comparative data is lacking. There are no international projects that address the importance of Internet for younger generations' engagement, at least no projects that rise above the level of anecdote, case studies, and presentations of 'travelers tales'. Evidence on the rise of alternative forms of engagement is scattered and highly underdeveloped.

especially in those societies that are less inclusive as regards participation of specific groups in society's decision-making platforms (young people, women, gays, ethnic minorities, etc.).¹¹

This not only goes for the involvement in Internet, but also for other types of activities. Small-scale qualitative studies suggest that shared consumer interests, shared fashions, shared musical tastes, etc., instead of for instance involvement in traditional political or ideological interest groups, create the strongest sense of collectivity and are the ultimate factor of sociality for younger generations (Willis, 1990; see also Laermans, 1993). In sociology we know relatively little about the civic dimensions of leisure and consumption activities. Consumer and shopping activities, activities that take up a large part of the time spent by younger generations, can have the same civic result as Internet use: yield new forms of solidarity, community life, and involvement in the common good. Most notable is politically inspired consumerism: buying ecologically, politically and socially well-produced goods and boycotting goods with the contrary traits.¹² Through these consumer channels people build trust, share collective interests, and more directly hope to solve common (public) problems. Sports activities and cultural activities (e.g., music-making, -buying, and -listening) may have similar value. In these forms of participation strong civic links between people are created, in many cases aimed at deliberately criticizing and contesting existing disengagement and political balances in society (De Léséleuc et al., 2002). Many of these activities aim to build a new community identity, a new 'among their own', as well as alternative routes to establish solidarity, community life and involvement in the common good. Leisure and consumption activities may have become the main playing field for expressions of political voices, for the driving forces of new senses of belonging to society, and promotion of social connectedness.

Moreover, it can be argued, partly based on French studies at hand, that there is a strong generational dimension to this issue. Even when only smaller groups of young people engage in these types of activities, these activities might well point to a transition away from the 'biography' of citizenship that was 'normal' for the older generation, one

¹¹ Of course the Internet as well as the mobile phone are used for many other things, things that in popularity easily outnumber 'political' use. The issue here is not that overall (across all nations) the Internet fails to include those who do not involve in political-as-is and thus that it does not impact overall patterns of political engagement (Dahlgren, 2001). The issue is that it is likely that it is an alternative for those of the younger generation (as well as of other groups) who might consider involving in politics in real-life (the higher educated segments therefore), but who find the Internet a platform that serves their purposes better than real-life political engagement. See below for arguments from the perspective of life courses and generations.

¹² See e.g. the Mecca Cola alternative to Coca Cola. With buying this cola one contributes to the Palestine cause. An example of *drinking politics* ("buvez engagé!"). See: <http://www.mecca-cola.com/en/>

that needed stable identities, strong-tie relationships, and life-long commitments in formal institutions, associations, and established political homes. In France, but perhaps also in many other advanced societies we witness a rise of insider-outsider polarizations of generations (Chauvel, 2002; Diepstraten, et al., 1999). Many institutions in these countries are led by a homogeneous group of Baby Boomers (roughly, born before 1955) not involved in securing issues that are important for younger generations. Young generations in France face great difficulties in participating in decision-making, acquiring political know how, and attaining abilities to take part in the collective bargaining of collective choices. Moreover, decisions are made and planned by these institutions that have long-term negative effects for the younger generation, that seriously contrast with the comfortable, affluent and high-opportunity past of the Baby Boomers and that do not affect the (shorter) future of Baby Boomers (especially as concerns demands for lifelong learning, employability at the work place, individualization of social security, and slacking investments in provisions to combine work and family life). In France (Chauvel, 2002) here is an exceptional risk of ‘dyssocialization’: a growing gap between participative aspirations and the real social conditions among the younger generation provoking disappointment, disinterest and anomie. The values transmitted by the 1960s generation on the benefits of participation, on the importance of self-development, on engineering your own life and planning your future conflict fundamentally with the practice of being denied access to participative society, the practice of the crumbling of the welfare system and the realities of the educational system and labour market. In times of economic affluence this might not seem an overt problem; in times of economic decline – as we are experiencing in many societies at the moment – this problem of dyssocialization becomes pressing. The search by young people for other ways to convey political voices and to express their engagement therefore seems not only a matter of ‘choice’ that aligns with modernity’s need to ‘keep all options open’, it also seems a matter of generational exclusion from institutions that do not open-up to youths. Also because of these developments young generations may turn to mobile and Internet platforms to engage in democracy.

Leisure and consumption and with it the world of new media, finally, may well be the true playing fields of modern citizenship for the youngest generations, perhaps especially so for younger generations in particular advanced societies. Some indirect proof can be found in our generational analyses of the longitudinal and cross-cultural dataset of the *European Values Survey* (Dekker et al., 2003). Especially in France and Germany we found that after a rise in participation in organized leisure life in the 1980s the level of participation dropped in the 1990s. Among the youngest German generation

the drop was quite strong. In many other European nations there was a steady increase. Perhaps the German young generation in particular is prototypical for a generation that seeks leisure life outside organized realms and that can be enjoyed individually outside formal settings. Leisure participation according to Putnam (2000) is believed to boost social trust and in the end democratic engagement. This is also what we found. However we found a result that Putnam did not expect. In Europe the younger and not the older generation (as is the case in the US) participating in organizations is more inclined to trust others, regardless of the period we are looking at (the early 1980s and 1990s and the late 1990s). At the end of the 1990s political discussions are only higher among baby boomers who participate in leisure organizations. The youngest generation has a high level of this type of discussions regardless of participation. This especially goes for the early 1980s period when their formative experiences coincide with strong upheaval in European societies (the no future atmosphere of threatening ecological disasters, nuclear war, mass unemployment and crumbling welfare states). The baby boom generation, finally, is more involved in political action of the once unconventional but by now mainstream type (demonstrations, signing petitions, etc.). Taken together with the heightened political discussions among their formally organized contemporaries one can make the preliminary case that especially people who were young in the 1960s are the one's targeted in studies on democratic engagement. Members of young generations who have had their major formative experiences in the late 1980s and 1990s, might well have chosen types of political engagement and platforms of this engagement – e.g. by using Internet-based strategies - that are not tapped with the classic political science indicators. It is time to thoroughly investigate these alternative types and platforms of engagements and in doing so to especially take account of the sociological reality of the de-standardized and biographized life course that in advanced societies may very well serve as the basis for contemporary generation formation among today's younger cohorts which, in turn, changes the face of democratic engagement of this future adult generation.

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