

A Generation in Need of Hope

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JEREMI SURI, MAY 13 2014

The passivity of young citizens, especially in Europe and the United States, has become a common topic of conversation. *The Guardian* newspaper recently asked, “Why aren’t Europe’s young people rioting any more?” A prominent, recent book in the United States argues that students at universities are “paying to party” (Armstrong & Hamilton 2013), rather than make a difference in the world. Writers observe young and talented citizens who express dismay and pessimism about the future, but continue to act as if there is nothing they can do about it. The young are not only passive, they are resigned to low expectations.

Their low expectations are evident in many areas. Young people in the United States and the European Union have low voting rates, low employment rates, and stagnant education rates. They form fewer associations and clubs than predecessor generations. They are slow to marry and they have few children. They are ever-more focused on Internet and social media communications, rather than the face-to-face interactions that dominated youth culture in past decades. Young people in most societies today are fragmented, uncertain, and anxious about their futures.

The anxiety is perhaps the most immediate impediment to activism. Nervousness about the future drives a combination of live-for-the-moment materialism and hyper-concern about grades and credentials. Anticipating that they will never have it so good again, young people are enticed to enjoy their privileges while they can. The intensive competition to maintain those privileges, and get access to diminishing opportunities for advancement, drives a simultaneous effort to establish “elite” connections and other markers of exceptionalism.

To get ahead in anxious times, one must show that one can live in the moment and climb a steep path of achievement. Just as college students are “paying to party,” they are also competing in what Ben Wildavsky aptly calls the “great brain race” (Wildavsky 2010). Despite sky-rocketing tuition, hundreds of thousands of students from around the world want to enroll in the best American and European universities each year. They want to be around others who share their ambitions and privilege. They want to attend the most exciting social events. They want to live in the nicest dormitories. They want to open the most doors for future earnings. Above all, they want the elite status that comes with a Harvard or Oxford or Stanford degree. These are terribly anxious students who do not believe they can make it on their own talents. They need access to privilege to protect their paths for success.

Partying and privilege leave little space for risk-taking, especially political risk-taking. Young people do not protest because they fear the consequences of arrest, surveillance, and guilt-by-association. Evidence of “trouble-making” becomes a permanent part of an individual’s electronic record, easily passed from one potential employer to another. Signs of strong commitments attach “liberal” and “conservative” labels to people – labels they have trouble escaping, even when their views match with neither school of thought. Most of all, my students tell me that they wish to avoid the public harassment and character assassination that blankets controversial individuals, multiplied many times over by the profusion of unmediated social media.

Young people with fragile egos and precarious social positions are not prepared to weather vicious attacks on their souls. They would rather stay out of the public eye and pursue quiet wealth and personal happiness. They would rather disengage from the political process.

The political disengagement of the young is the biggest difference between our time and prior eras. People always

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crave power, but today the most talented young citizens seek it in non-political venues that appear “safer” than the mud-slinging world of politics. They opt to become bankers rather than mayors, they apply to international non-government organizations (NGOs) rather than local community organizations, and they choose to run a start-up instead of starting a political campaign. None of their decisions are bad, but they are mostly designed to minimize exposure to public risk. The professions of choice today offer fewer public leadership opportunities than the more explicit political positions pursued by the best and the brightest of years before. Money has always driven politics. Today, the pursuit of money isolates politics from daily practice among the young.

As a historian who has written about young people in the second half of the twentieth century, I must say that many of the dynamics I describe are not new. Young people partied hard in the Cold War, and they engaged in crass professional behavior as well. They were materialists and many of them, despite the political street scenes, focused on private matters to the neglect of public needs. As I have written in my book, *Power and Protest* (2003), there was an irritating narcissism in the flaunting of radical lifestyles and counter-cultural behavior among many youth groups. The desire for power, as much as idealism, drove protest in the 1960s. The desire for power, amidst anxieties about its loss, drives the apparent passivity today. Protest and passivity are both parts of the historical pursuit of power.

Beyond power is hope, and it is around that concept that current conditions are historically distinct. Unlike any previous generation of young educated citizens in the last century, today’s students are devoid of hope. That does not mean they are dominated by despair. They are not. Instead, they believe the present in all of its basic forms – rising inequality, dysfunctional governments, low-scale warfare, and climate destruction – is unchangeable. Young people across societies express concern about these developments, but they also feel powerless to do anything to reform them. They are resigned to accept and master the present, rather than change it for the better. Young populists, progressives, socialists, communists, New Dealers, and Cold Warriors were never so resigned.

Today’s political resignation reflects an absence of apparent alternatives. Young people just do not see a replacement for the “system” as it operates. With the evident failures of Marxism and various religious fundamentalisms, the non-existence of an alternative ideology leaves a huge vacuum for those who wish to build political change. Where are the big ideas to challenge present injustices? Where are the big plans to reform decrepit legacy institutions?

Raymond Aron (1962) and François Furet (1999) taught us that ideological obsessions frequently become oppressive. That is true, but nihilism is equally dangerous. Ideological emptiness sucks the imaginative oxygen out of the air. If you do not have ideas and plans, you cannot imagine an alternative world. If you cannot look back to the past for inspiration and dream forward about better worlds, then you are stuck in ahistorical limbo, living in a present of shallow possibilities.

Young people take to the streets to demand change when they have enough hope to believe that they can make the world better. Young people become active participants in politics when they see a place for themselves as leaders based on their energetic and naïve imaginations, which reject the hardened pessimisms of experienced veterans. Hope must drive political renewal. Hope must come from the young. It must nourish their rebellious instincts.

The public protests behind the Arab Spring, the popular revolt in Western Ukraine, and even the Occupy Movement in the United States show that many young people still have hope. Their hope, however, is too episodic. It gets beaten down too fast by guns and, even more, by grizzled nay-sayers who warn against “rocking the boat,” especially in such uncertain times.

Young people need big ideas and compelling inspirational figures to rally, to argue, and to hope for a better world. That is what drove prior historical moments of global protest and democratic reform. That is what we need today. Only when wealthy and established people in society begin nurturing hope, rather than fear, will we see the renaissance of youth creativity in politics that our world so desperately needs. Instead of asking why young people are so passive, we should ask why everyone else is failing to encourage their activism. Instead of emphasizing the many threats that come with policy change, we should all devote our energies to new opportunities. That attitude shift, among young and old, is what transformed the conservative 1950s into the radical 1960s. A similar movement

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might form as we move through the second decade of the twenty-first century. We can only hope...

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