

Valuing public welfare: on student politics as representation, mobilization and prefiguration (0122)

Gritt Nielsen

Aarhus University, Denmark

In Denmark, economic redistribution and extensive free public services are still cornerstones of welfare state politics. Based on the rationale that everyone, independent of economic background, should have equal access to education, students are not charged any fees but receive a monthly study grant from the state. Importantly, however, the development of the Danish welfare society in the post WWII period can also be linked to particular ideals and ideas of efficiency in democratic processes and political decision-making in terms of structures for representative democracy as well as traditions that see democracy as a form of life oriented towards creating consensus and community (Green-Pedersen, Klitgaard and Nørgaard 2004: 43; Koch 1981). The value of welfare – and thereby of the public university – is therefore not just a question of economic redistribution and free education. It can also be seen as a question of what the anthropologists Langer and Højlund (2011) call ‘well-faring’ and how to ‘fare well’ in society. Rather than merely being an objective and measurable value, welfare here becomes an ethical orientation, including certain norms for appropriate behaviour and democratic participation.

The fact that the notion of ‘value’ has multiple meanings – often described as a contrast between (economic) *value* and (social or cultural) *values*; or value as price and value as priceless (see e.g. Graeber 2001, Skeggs 2014) – makes it both a challenging and interesting concept to work with. Like Miller (2008), I find it fruitful because it directs our attention to and allows us to study the *relationship* between the economic and the other-than-economic. In this paper, I am mainly inspired by anthropological value theory (see e.g. Munn 1986; Graeber 2001) and I therefore explore the other-than-economic value of welfare as a question of the way politically engaged students – through different modes of political involvement characterised as ‘representation’, ‘mobilisation’ and ‘exemplification/prefiguration’ - ‘measure the importance of their own actions, as reflected in one or another socially recognized form’ (Graeber 2001: 47, 230). This means that politically active students are not only engaged in shaping the value(s) of public welfare through the *content* of and arguments put forward in their parliamentary and extra-parliamentary work. They also enact and value public welfare in particular ways in and through their various *forms* of political involvement.

By taking this approach, where I see politics as fundamentally “the struggle to establish what value *is*” (Graeber 2001: 88), I also engage with the question of what the meaning of *public* – in public welfare and the public university – comes to be. Contested values of public welfare, I show, emerge and circulate through the particular modes of political performance which summon or conjure up different kinds of ‘publics’ (cf. Mahoney and Clarke 2013; Newman & Clarke 2009). A public (as well as *the* public) is a diffuse and multi-faceted concept (see e.g. Fraser 1990, Warner 2002). Here, I take a public to entail a group of indefinite and uncountable strangers who are linked through a common interest about which they engage in an ongoing conversation. In this perspective, the public sphere consists of many intersecting publics, where both particular interests as well as common goals may be constituted and contested (Warner 2002). Paraphrasing Mahoney and Clarke (2013: 936) one can say that different values are inscribed into and acted out through different modes of performances that work to *summon* and *call into existence* different publics.

As has long been the case, student organisations and networks constantly have to balance parliamentary work with activist mobilisation, and a focus on narrow university politics with issues of wider political concern. Accordingly, the 'public(s)' – to whom the public university and public welfare is assumed to be an issue of concern – is summoned and conjured up in many different and potentially conflicting ways. The increasingly 'professionalised' student unions tend to focus on political *representation* and promote a notion of a public which consists of competing interest groups (or sub-publics), with whom they have to compete or form alliances. However, with a growing interest among students in flexible, eventful, ad hoc forms of political participation many more activist oriented networks have flourished in recent years, often attempting to *mobilise* students and/as a wider public through a focus on broader political issues rather than specifically student related ones. Here students are to be mobilised as *citizens* and members of a general public rather than simply as *students* (and members of a sub-public). Finally, I point to how in recent years, inspired by among other the 1960s student revolts and the Occupy Wall Street related movements, the 'publicness' of public welfare for certain groups of activist students has been linked to attempts to 're-politicise' (and make of public concern in a new way) the university and larger society. The public(s) here takes the form of an ever changing and diverse 'multitude' summoned in and through public events and happenings as well as through everyday acts of *exemplification* and *prefiguration*. The public university is here ascribed a particular value as an important site for creating and summoning such a diverse public.

The protests and politics instigated by contemporary students in various countries are often criticised for focusing only on issues associated with their own current or future economic situation (Pinheiro and Antoniowicz 2015: 62) or for failing to recognise and address the underlying structural contradictions in their fights in that they often argue for *both* universal access to free education *and* social mobility for everyone, whereby they take a conservative approach and end up just defending current systems (Sukariah & Tannack 2015). However, students' different ways of conjuring up legitimate publics convey that many politically active students are extremely reflexive about the pros and cons of their approaches. They constantly negotiate and balance the desire to obtain a strong voice in the established system, picking their fights with care, with the desire to rethink and transform participation and politics altogether. Both strategies come with risks – the risk of being denounced, de-legitimated or becoming 'non-publics' in the sense that their public actions are deemed 'inappropriate' by other students, politicians or a wider public.

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