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Title Snowflakes and Smashed Avocados: Exploring the Contradictory Representations of the Higher Education Generation in times of Political Crisis and Change

Session From 'youthquakes' to 'university bribes': Understanding Higher Education as the locus for classed, gendered and national repertoires of young people's political agency (Finn)

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Snowflakes and Smashed Avocados: Exploring the Contradictory Representations of the Higher Education Generation in times of Political Crisis and Change

The massification of Higher Education (HE) has seen a significant rise in young people attending university over the last quarter century, meaning that young adults born after 1980 – 'millennials' – have generally higher levels of educational qualifications than previous generations (though increases in participation of working-class and minority ethnic students has increased at a much slower rate (Bathmaker et al. 2016)). Millennials are often referred to as a special or different kind of generation, requiring specific kinds of leadership to reflect their changing values and expectations (Ng, Schweitzer and Lyons, 2010)). Despite evidence which suggests young people's engagement with formal politics has been relatively stable over the past decade (see Brooks, Byford and Sela 2015), within popular media millennials are represented as self-interested consumers, too narcissistic and apathetic to engage beyond their personalised social media circles (Greenslade, 2016: *The Guardian*), and having a deep antipathy towards and distrust of political parties and professional politicians (Henn and Foard 2012). Indeed, having grown up against the backdrop of a digital revolution dominated by the everyday use of social media, and in a culture of marketization and entrepreneurial neoliberalism (Rose 1996), 'Millennials do not see voting as a duty, but regard it as the duty of politicians to woo them. They see parties not as movements deserving of loyalty, but as brands they can choose between or ignore' (The Economist, 2017).

Since the election of Donald Trump, the Brexit vote and the UK General Election 2017, there appears to have been a sea change in the ways young, highly educated millennials are positioned in political debates. From 'youthquakes' to public marches and campus campaigns – students have been brought into sharper focus, and HE has been used as a mechanism through which to construct a particular narrative of young people as (in)authentic and (in)credible political actors. From millennials' voting intentions to more contemporary and digital modes of civic participation, representations of young people are complex and contradictory, with HE and university spaces playing a pivotal role in these discussions to position millennials as: individualised consumers; disconnected globalists; precarious snowflakes; and agents of change.

Individualised consumers?

The idea of the neoliberal university is now a common one (Giroux 2014). privatisation and trebling of HE tuition fees in the UK since 2012 has played a particular role in representing students as market-oriented neoliberal consumers (Williams 2013). The introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) presents itself as another means through which students might begin to present themselves, and likewise be presented, as acting instrumentally, seeking 'value for money' and holding academics to account in the marketised sector. Thus, the notion that students are self-interested 'complainers', lacking the resilience to cope with ostensibly trivial matters, is likely to gain traction, particularly as campaigns about more serious and collective political issues have been muted in recent years. This lack of collective action has been linked to instrumentalism of today's

students, but also to the greater constraints on their free-time which come in part because of the marketised model, as Redmond notes: unlike young adults in the 1960s, contemporary students have not the time to protest as 'they have part-time jobs to go to' (2009 cf. Williams 2011: 180). In this context, HE is used to position young students as highly individualistic, but nevertheless somewhat precarious and vulnerable.

Precarious Snowflakes?

The issue of precarity is mostly borne out in discussions of employability and graduate transitions into employment. Since the financial crisis of 2008 the so-called 'graduate premium' has come under close scrutiny as the growing number of university leavers navigate a congested labour market (Brown). In many cases, parents have filled the gap left by the State and the weakened labour market by supporting for young adults for much longer. This kind of precarity has, according to some (Furedi 2001; Ecclestone and Hayes 2009) led to a sense of 'diminished subjectivity' for millennials, who instead seek agency and self-affirmation through micro- and identity-politics. The apparent rise of the 'no platform' and 'safe space' movement on university campuses is taken as evidence of this and within these discourses the spaces and practices of HE have been mobilised to represent students as delicate snowflakes, intolerant or unable to cope with divergent political views. Writing for *The Guardian*, Ian Dunt (2015) cites numerous cases in which students have come together as political collectives to reject speakers whose views they do not support,

In recent months, Oxford University cancelled a debate on abortion because protesters objected to the fact it was being held between two men; the Cambridge Union was asked (but refused) to withdraw its speaking invitation to Germaine Greer because of her views on transgender issues; officials at London Southbank took down a "flying spaghetti monster" poster because it might cause religious offence; UCL banned the Nietzsche Club after it put up posters saying "equality is a false God", and Dundee banned the Society for the Protection of Unborn Children from their freshers' fair. The Sun is banned on dozens of campuses because of Page 3. Robin Thicke's Blurred Lines song has also been banned by many student unions.

Although this is clear evidence of millennials engaging as political agents, the 'No Platform' movement is roundly derided by those who regard students as opposed to free speech. Spiked magazine, for example, has responded by compiling its own *Free Speech University Rankings* which reveals, through a traffic light system, which universities are 'hostile' or open to free speech. The experiences, spaces and processes of Higher Education are, thus, often made to do significant work in (re)presenting young adults as apathetic and politically naïve. In the USA the University of Chicago took a firm stance against 'trigger warnings' and 'safe spaces' in an effort to reinstate the 'proper values' of HE and, in so doing, represented young students as easily offended and lacking political credibility. This raises questions about the ways in which HE is read as a marker of privilege, discounting many young students' political views and agency when they dare to act collectively and seek change. A similar tone emerged from the Global March for Science and the Women's March (both of which included young people and students in great numbers) following the election of Trump as president in 2016.

Disconnected globalists

There has emerged, then, a sense of students as simultaneously global and outward-looking in their politics, and naval-gazing in their self-interest and individualism. The last two key polling events in the UK – the EU Referendum in 2016, and General Election in has illuminated an interesting moment

through which to view this contradiction. Following the vote for Brexit millennials were largely held responsible for Britain voting to exit the EU because of their poor turnout (*The Guardian* 2016), criticised for their poor turnout on the one hand, and their globalist, latte-drinking elitism on the other. One year later, when the same age-group were thought to have brought about a 'youthquake' triggering a surge for Labour, they were criticised for cynically falling for the 'university bribe' and naïvely backing what the mainstream media regards as an idealist and out-of-touch Labour Party.

Agents of change?

The paper concludes by reflecting on the extent to which discourses around student political participation have the potential to position millennials as agents of change. Looking to examples, such as the #feesmustfall movement in South Africa, the paper ends with an optimistic note about how millennials might mobilise in times of crisis.

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