Bessant, J.: Making-up People: Youth, Truth and Politics

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In 2018 and 2019, mass numbers of school-aged students walked out of school to protest against governmental inaction on climate change—in a movement known variously as Fridays for Future, Youth Strike for Climate and School Strike 4 Climate. Sociologists of youth were caught ‘on the backfoot’ (Wood 2020, p. 2) by this movement’s rapid transnational affective contagiousness. In many ways, the School Strikes provided a large-scale example of young people’s re-invention of political participation (Vromen et al. 2015) ‘by any media necessary’ on foot and online (Jenkins et al. 2016). The strikes, however, received polarised responses from politicians, media reporters and online pundits; Greta Thunberg elicited ‘enormous support and admiration from supporters and vitriolic abuse from others’ (Bessant 2021, p. 3).

The significant value of Judith Bessant’s latest book, *Making-Up People: Youth, Truth and Politics* (2021), is in its historical sociological contextualisation of the polarised public emotional responses to and representations of young people’s political engagement. Where contemporary analyses of the School Strikes for Climate movement risk suggesting that the strikes and these polarised responses are something new, Bessant insightfully draws attention to the historical continuities in contemporary debates and the ‘long-standing animus about the very idea that young people are, or could ever be, taken seriously as political agents’ (p. 2). Recent polemic responses to young people’s political participation prompt Bessant to inquire into the historical constitution of ‘common sense’ ways of understanding children and young people’s non/participation in politics, and into the ‘many inconsistencies that characterise official and popular thinking about young people and politics’ (p. 13).

Bessant takes a nuanced ‘relational’ approach to exploring these social representations and their histories, primarily working with Pierre Bourdieu, but situating Bourdieu’s work within a relational philosophical and sociological tradition including Leibniz, Spinoza, Hegel and Marx, as well as Durkheim, Levi-Strauss, Simmel,

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Mannheim and Isin (p. 42, endnote 10). Bessant describes a relational approach, after Bourdieu, as emphasising the ‘mutual relations between “words” and “things” that are produced by intellectual practices’ (p. 12). For Bessant, common sense representations of the child and young person’s political potential are inextricable from the work of ‘experts, intellectuals, writers, journalists, [and] policy makers’ whose work serves to “make up” certain kinds of people’ (p. 6). These adult experts and professionals do not simply describe ‘children’ and ‘youth’, and groups within these broad categories, but their social representations *constitute* those ‘types of people’ and inform how those people ‘come to understand themselves, how they respond to those representations and how they act in the world’ (p. 9, Bessant’s emphasis). In Chapter 1, Bessant carefully argues the need for a clearly articulated theory of social representations; analysing the constitutive power of ‘expert’ representations of a group (such as young people) supports understanding of how and why official ‘knowledge’ about a group often ‘does not align with how those being researched and talked about experience their own lives and understand themselves’ (p. 39).

In Chapter 2, Bessant astutely explores the contested histories of apprehending and classifying the boundaries of *politics* and *the political*—in particular, how social and political scientists have represented children and young people as political beings (p. 45). Bessant traces the connections between the received ‘common sense’ idea that children and young people are ‘semi or partial citizens’ (p. 46), ‘immature and incapable of the rational deliberation and decision-making’ required for participation in democratic political life (p. 47), and a ‘narrow conceptualisation of politics’ (p. 51) that understands politics as a demarcated sphere from the ‘private’ and the ‘social’ (cf. Nakata 2008). Political philosopher Hannah Arendt’s thought becomes a case in point to track the potential pitfalls in interpreting and representing young people’s political lives. Bessant notes the potential for Arendt’s concept of ‘natality’—the bringing forth of renewal and novelty into ‘democratic orders’ from those ‘on their borders’ (p. 61)—to invite reconsideration of ‘the role children and young people can play in politics on the border of the political order’ (p. 62, Bessant’s emphasis). Yet, according to Bessant, Arendt failed to recognise when these dynamics were at work in her own time. At the beginning of Chapter 2, Bessant recounts the story of Elizabeth Eckford, the 15-year-old African-American student who was photographed by press photographers on September 4, 1957, outside the all-white Little Rock Central High School, Arkansas, USA, surrounded by a jeering white mob, during the national campaign for desegregation led by the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured Peoples (NAACP). Arendt published an essay after the photograph, criticising Eckford’s parents and the NAACP for asking her to be ‘be a hero’ (1959, p. 45, cited by Bessant 2021, p. 43). Arendt, according to Bessant, thought that Elizabeth Eckford and the other African-American students in the Little Rock Nine had been ‘manipulated by their elders who should have known better’ (p. 43). Bessant narrates how Arendt’s critique was countered by African-American writer Ralph Ellison, who ‘said that Arendt failed to see what was actually happening’ (Bessant’s summary, p. 43)—that is, how African-American parents ‘were obligated to teach their children that America was for many, if not all African-Americans, a dangerous society’ and where ‘children and young people had a legitimate role in being political’ (p. 64). For Bessant, Arendt and

Ellison interpreted Eckford's actions differently because of their 'different conceptions of the status as children' and 'of politics' (p. 44). Arendt's strong distinction between the 'private' and 'public' and 'the social' and 'the political' shaped her critique of Eckford's parents and the NAACP (p. 63). According to Bessant, the gap between Arendt's theorising of natality and her misrecognition of the politics of Elizabeth Eckford and other African-American young people of her time highlights 'the effect of interpretive frames that inhibit our [that is, any adult expert's] capacity to see what children and young people are actually doing and experiencing' (p. 51).

Chapter 3 begins Bessant's historical sociological analysis of young people in the eighteenth century. Bessant draws attention to the relative youth (compared to contemporary times) of political leaders and military commanders of figures like William Pitt, who became Prime Minister of Britain at 24, and Napoleon Bonaparte, who was a general in the French army by 24. Bessant considers the central role of young people in the French Revolution, and how the French Revolution 'linked an idea about being young with the idea of change' (p. 86). The French Revolution is argued to have 'created an association' between 'the idea of democracy and equality, dangerous disorder and the destructive role played by young people' that would 'lead to representations of young people as part of the "dangerous classes"' (p. 87). Chapter 4 tracks the emergence, following the French Revolution, of the category of the 'dangerous classes', and the simultaneous 'civilising offensive' on working-class children and young people in Europe and colonised subjects of European empires. For Bessant, there are 'significant affinities' between late nineteenth-century representations of adolescents as 'savages' and 'barbarians' and 'the popular white-racist view of colonialism as the necessary imposition of civilisation on "savages" and "natives"' (p. 109). These affinities are exemplified in the development of the "'scientific" model of adolescence' (p. 115) by North American psychologist G. Stanley Hall. Hall's recapitulation theory—that is, the theory that 'the biological development of each individual recapitulates the history of the whole species' from 'barbaric' to 'civilised'—created a 'new common sense' of adolescence as 'a transitional agonistic and rebellious stage in the life-cycle' (p. 119). Bessant demonstrates how Hall's work, which informs contemporary concerns about young people's hormones and peer-orientation, was profoundly influenced by eugenic theories of 'race, racial hygiene and evolution' that naturalised white supremacy (p. 115).

Chapters 5 and 6 jump forward to the 1950s (Chapter 5) and 1960s (Chapter 6) to track the ongoing logics of the 'civilising offensive' in discourses of 'juvenile delinquency' and 'deviant' student protesters. Chapter 5 explores the 'discovery' of juvenile delinquency following the world wars of 1914–1918 and 1939–1945 and the alarm about the 'degeneration of "the (white) race"' when young women did not take up conventional roles as 'good mothers, devoted wives and homemakers' (p. 149) with the post-war boom of the 1950s. Chapter 5 explores the particular case of 'widgies' in 1950s Australia: girls who accompanied 'bodgies'—a youth subculture that was 'the Australian equivalent of an American "zoot-suiter" or an English "Teddy boy"' (p. 122). For Bessant, the case of the bodgies and widgies in the 1950s 'highlights the *gap* that exists between how

young people have been represented and what they were actually doing, their lived experience, or how they interpreted their actions and the world around them’ (p. 126, Bessant’s emphasis). Bessant insightfully demonstrates the ways in which the widgies were constituted as deviant (from gender norms), and as invisible (in comparison to the prominent representation of male ‘bodgies’) through their representation in Australian press reporting, ‘expert’ representation of ‘juvenile delinquency’ and ‘maladjustment’ by the ‘eugenicist psychological network’ (p. 137), and interview accounts of self-identified ‘widgies’ in the 1990s. Bessant persuasively argues that reductive interpretations and representations of the widgies served to obfuscate ‘the deeply political nature’ of the widgies’ dress, deportment and sexuality and their challenges to ‘a hegemonic, gendered symbolic order’ and ‘fields of gendered power’ (p. 150).

In Chapter 6, Bessant takes up the representations of student activism in the 1960s and 1970s, with a focus on secondary and university student activism in the USA, Britain and Australia. Bessant tracks the ‘negative and often pejorative ways’ (p. 154) in which student activism was represented in press coverage and in social scientific interpretations of students’ activism. A range of reductive interpretive frames were placed over student protest—from explanations focussing on ‘intergenerational conflict’ and ‘poor impulse control’ (p. 155) to assumptions that young people were ‘communist dupes’ (p. 157). These single-sided interpretations by ‘expert’ commentators, according to Bessant, ‘failed to perceive the possibility that protesters could be protesting about issues that were important to them’ (p. 162), and ‘did not engage with the specifically political moral issues that moved them to act’ (p. 165). Protest actions of secondary and tertiary students of this period, according to Bessant, ‘demonstrated that young people were very well able to engage in continuing creative and well-organised political practices’, notwithstanding ‘the predominantly hostile responses that their activism provoked’ (p. 180).

Where the previous chapters had worked with the emergence and flourishing of modernist narratives of ‘an unrelenting historical process of socio-economic, technological and intellectual progress’ (p. 184), Chapter 7 maps how representations of young people changed (and stayed the same) following the impacts of economic and climate changes from the late 1970s onwards—consequences of the unrelenting extractivist logics of colonialism and capitalism. Bessant tracks how the ‘problem of unemployment’ became translated ‘into a problem of the unemployed and of [the] young unemployed in particular’ (p. 207), and the ascendance of two representative tropes: the young precariat and the young entrepreneur. Economist Guy Standing’s (2011) account of ‘the precariat’ is argued to have ‘many historical resonances with the “dangerous classes” of the 1840s and 1850s’ (p. 193). Standing’s representation of the ‘precariat’ constructs young people as ‘victims of “structural forces”’ (Bessant 2021, p. 203) – vulnerable but simultaneously to be feared as potentially sparking “a politics of inferno” (Standing 2011, p. vi, cited by Bessant 2021, p. 203). The alternate representation of young people’s entrepreneurialism, created by neoliberal governments, financial agencies and think-tanks, offers ‘a more upbeat and reassuring story’ (p. 203), but fails to acknowledge or account for ‘the decline of full-time employment or long term stagnant productivity or halting wage growth’ (p. 206). Both representations—the young precariat and the young entrepreneur—are ‘shaped by political worldviews

and specific political-economic interests’ (p. 205) and divert attention from the “everyday reality of precarious labour markets, political upheaval lead by conservative and reactionary forces, and global risks such as climate change” (Threadgold 2019, p. 5, cited by Bessant 2021, p. 206).

Chapters 8 and 9 explore young people’s political responses to these altered conditions—in particular—children and young people’s political activism in the face of persistent government inaction on anthropogenic climate change. Chapter 8 summarises historical examples of school student activism and their representation—from anti-Iraq war protests involving school students across Europe, the USA and Australia (pp. 221–222) to more recent digital political satire including the creation and distributions of memes on platforms like TikTok (pp. 224–227, 229–231). Bessant analyses the political tactics of global youth climate justice activism: from physical strikes (2018–2019) to digital strikes (with the emergence of COVID-19), to legal challenges where young people are taking their governments to court—‘playing them at their own game’ (p. 234). Drawing on Arendt, Bessant suggests that these collective actions, in online and offline spaces, are suggestive of the ‘emergence of a new kind of politics’ (p. 234)—an “impulse” that “springs” from the beginning [of] “something new on our own initiative” (Arendt, 1958, cited by Bessant 2021, p. 232). In Chapter 9, Bessant presents an overview of how ‘political elites (e.g. politicians, policy-makers and mainstream media workers)’ have represented children and young people ‘when they demonstrated their capacity to be political’ in recent years (p. 239). Like other recent media analyses of the school strikers and other young activists (e.g. Bergmann and Ossewaarde 2020; Taft 2020), Bessant notes the prevalence of tropes of young people as, variously, ‘privileged brats’, ‘vulnerable dupes’ (p. 245) and ‘naughty truants’ (p. 247). Bessant draws on Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor’s politics of recognition and misrecognition to account for how ‘many young people are rejecting how they are being represented’ and engaging in ‘debates to contest how there are named’, affirming ‘their political status’ and directly questioning ‘the authority of those offering those accounts of them’ (p. 250).

This compelling and important book will appeal to sociologists of childhood and youth, historians and political scientists keen to attend to the representation of young people in contemporary political life. The book opens a pathway for further work on contemporary representations of young people’s politics, not only for persistent negative representations but also in analysing historical resonances in apparently positive representations. Greta Thunberg is often credited for sparking the student climate justice movement and is the ubiquitous ‘face’ of contemporary youth climate activism. However, collective youth networks like Seed Indigenous Youth Climate Network in Australia and Pacific Climate Warriors, young Indigenous activists in other settler colonial nations, and young activists from the Global South have been campaigning for climate justice for at least the past ten years (Unigwe 2019). Why are these organisations and individual activists less visible in mainstream media representations of climate activism? Which organisations and individuals get platformed and gain traction in positive mainstream media/political representations, and how do representations of certain ‘extraordinary’ individuals (like Greta Thunberg) reinscribe historical discourses of white savourism (Bergmann and Ossewaarde 2020; Taft 2020)? While some young people may be ‘answering back’ (p. 237)

to dominant deficit representations of state institutions, understanding what is ‘actually happening’ necessitates also attending to decolonial and Indigenist politics of *refusal* of the colonial state as the primary recognising agent (Coulthard 2014; López López 2019). Further work might consider the political potency of young people’s refusals of ‘common sense’ politics-as-usual and the colonial extractivist state as they, collectively, seek to ‘make up’ another possible world.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The author declares no competing interests.

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