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**Great Games and Keeping it Cool: New political, social and cultural geographies of
young people's environmental activism**

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Abstract

Drawing on recent framings of young people's environmental activism as a 'game', alongside long-standing characterisations of youth as responsabilised environmental change-agents, in this Viewpoint I identify fertile research opportunities in the liminal spaces between moments of young people's action and the political and socio-cultural spaces through which those actions (might) diffuse. I argue that youth geographers should take care to engage critically with young activists' actions, as well as wider political and cultural responses to them, in order to avoid furthering problematic 'sustainability saviour' framings of youth.

Keywords

Politics; Games; Online Space; Youth Cultures; Family Practices

In this Viewpoint I highlight some of the translational process that (need to) occur in the course of instigating – or sometimes stifling – social, cultural and political change. I consider

the *spaces between* young people's environmental activism and the contexts of action they seek to influence. In doing so I articulate how children's and youth geographers might ensure their research encapsulates and interrogates the liminal spaces where young people's agency intermingles with and catalyses (or challenges) that of others. I reference three interlinked spatial contexts in order to illustrate some of these liminalities and the specific empirical and theoretical challenges they pose. First, and with reference to BBC World News coverage of the World Economic Forum in Davos (January 2020), I consider the implications of framing young people's activism as a 'game' being played with political leaders. I then consider the home and neighbourhood as scenes of 'domestic geopolitics' allied with environmental activism. Here I reflect on how the socio-material structures young people encounter shape the forms their embodied activism might take. The final section reflects on how the existence of youth cultural space at the intersection of the material and digital presents opportunities and challenges for the communication of environmental activism, as well as implications for the longevity of environmental care as a favoured 'cause' amongst youth.

Youth Activism: A 'Great Game'?

It has been suggested that, 'challenges posed by young people to the state and to existing relations of power that uphold a range of injustices are still too often regarded with scepticism or even criminalized' (Hörschelmann 2016, 363). News coverage of young environmentalists' protests at the 2020 World Economic Forum (WEF) illustrated this trivialisation by reporting some WEF participants' views of youth activism as an attempt to 'play games' with political leaders (BBC News 2020). Not the serious geopolitical game-play embodied (if not acknowledged) by political leaders, of course; rather, a form of 'typical' youthful rebellion, a perspective used to undermine and trivialise young activists' actions and concerns. Increasingly recognising the limitations of 'dutiful dissent' within existing political structures and government sanctioned fora, young activists have turned to

mobilising traditional physical protests through building powerful and far-reaching online networks, through which they can define change and success on their own terms (Coleman 2010), challenge the logics, discourses and spatialities of existing power structures (O'Brien et al. 2018), and counteract state-led youth bodies' attempts to suppress or undermine young people's autonomous action (Scoones et al. 2018). The acts of 'disruptive dissent' (O'Brien et al. 2018) which have emerged are thus more challenging of the status quo and, as a result, may be more likely to be framed as a 'game' as an attempt to neutralise their influence. Yet disruptive actions aimed at instigating social and political change require, 'a mature level of social consciousness, moral reasoning, and insight into the situation that an individual or community is experiencing' (O'Brien et al. 2018, 42, citing Schlitz et al. 2010). They also demand risk management and mitigation, and courage, as young activists face considerable personal risks, from peer group alienation and expulsion to arrest or violence. If young people's environmental activism is in any sense a 'game', it can be one of high stakes, particularly for young activists from the Global South for whom activism is often as much a matter of everyday survival as an attempt to instigate larger-scale social change.

There is an intriguing paradox here. On the one hand there seems to be ambivalence from both academic and non-academic audiences towards the appropriateness of game-play and other forms of play/fulness as a means of challenging contemporary global issues, from commodity production to terrorism (Cook et al. 2018). On the other is a long-standing willingness to embrace 'the game' as a valuable political metaphor, either as (pseudo)nostalgia for the 'great game' of competition for global influence (e.g. Walberg 2011), or the more contemporary sporting metaphors found for instance in geopolitical discourse in the US (Sharp 2002, Gagen 2004) and, increasingly, South Asia (e.g. Mangan et al. 2013). Here, political 'games' are a distinctly adult domain, on the basis solely of the protagonists' physical age, far more than the sensibility of the aim, process or outcome.

Further, game theory has, for decades, been used as a means of producing, analysing and (de)constructing strategies of/for decision making in the international political arena (Walberg 2011). As such, there would seem to be consensus that the framing of political action as a 'game' is not just useful, but powerful. We might ask, therefore, what kind of politics are at work when the power of games is selectively forgotten when adult political figures seek to frame young people's actions as 'child-like' in order to distance them from the roles and responsibilities associated with adulthood (Skelton 2007; Bosco 2010; Woodyer 2012).

Perhaps contemporary political figures – and media commentators – when looking at the political acts of young environmental activists, have been preoccupied with that dimension of game-play characterised by Huizinger (1949, cited by Woodyer 2012) as 'not of real life' (i.e. actively fiction-making or inventing, antithetical to rationality), more than its ability to create order (albeit with its own internal logic) and 'make sense' of constituent elements. Dittmer (2015) has shown how geopolitical simulation games help young adults understand institutional ways of organising the world and give them space for playful subversion or diversion from the traditional 'script' in ways that can reveal new politics. In so doing the 'game world' and 'real world' are shown to be co-produced and mutually influencing – in ways that, as suggested above, global political figures realise for themselves, but may seek to deny in the case of young political actors. The nature of game-play as situated in an imagined future, 'encodes the future into our corporeal selves, shaping not only our responses but our field of sensibilities. Equally, such play is done in anticipation of the future need for such responses and sensibilities' (Dittmer 2015, 912). In other words, young environmental activists' 'games' have the potential to not only instigate global-scale awareness-raising through news headlines but micro-scale embodied change, particularly amongst direct participants.

There are, then, important questions here around how the translational work of commentators, including political figures, (mis)interprets and (mis)represents the intentions of young activists, and, in turn, the impacts of this on both sustaining activists' commitment and catalysing meaningful action at a range of scales. It seems paradoxical and nonsensical for contemporary political figures to attempt to undermine young people's environmental activism by calling it a 'game', when to do so could in fact *underline* its strategic intent by drawing parallels with the geopolitical realities of international governments. Given the transformative potential of game-play, there is considerable analytical mileage in empirical exploration of how young environmental activists conceive of and organise their action. How do they strategise, and what does this mean in practice, in terms of planning, action and follow-up? How is their action designed to place them closer to the social, cultural and political pressure points where change can be effected?

Keeping It Real

If there is anxiety high up in the (geo)political power hierarchy that young people's environmental activism illustrates a growing societal commitment to tackling environmental threats, this may in part result from recognition that much political power is located in the (semi)private realm of everyday life - what Woodyer and Carter (2018) discuss in terms of the 'domestication' of geopolitics through the material culture and practice of everyday life. The emerging field of 'domestic geopolitics' – or geopolitics of home (Brickell 2012) – has indicated considerable potential for illuminating analyses of 'how geopolitics is influenced by, and emerges *from*, the home' (Brickell 2012, 575, original emphasis), with recent work demonstrating some of the ways in which this is manifested in and through young people's lives (Benwell and Hopkins 2016).

The second spatial context I consider concerns the everyday material realities of the home and the ways in which they might shape (geo)political sensibilities and political action. For most young people, everyday life is situated in the social context of family and peers. Indeed, it is this specific form of social embeddedness that has contributed to the framing of young people as efficient catalysts for behaviour change towards environmentally sustainable living in both the Global North (e.g. Collins 2015; Hadfield-Hill 2013) and Global South (e.g. Cambers 2006; Walker 2020). Similarly, young people are often the mediators of families' connection to the wider political sphere through a range of socio-cultural and economic processes (Bosco 2010) and have been viewed as 'tactical agents' in micro-political contexts, such as the household (Kallio 2008; see also Bartos 2013). These social relations are firmly embedded in material contexts – the home, the street, the school, the town – which, together with these environments' constituent objects (the trees, the paths, the kitchen tables), are central to processes of relational identity construction. These are environments we care about because of the density of emotional entanglements we have with them. For young adults these might include frustrations or passions that drive their activism – a fury with excessive plastic packaging, or a concern about losing meadows to new roads. How, then, do their expressions of environmental activism translate into, and out of, the mundane spatial contexts of everyday material life, as everyday consumption of food, energy, water, mobility and consumer goods plays out?

In their research into new-build sustainable communities, Hadfield-Hill (2013) and Horton et al. (2015) show how young people's material surroundings have a direct impact on their understanding, and expectations, of what an environmentally sustainable (urban) landscape looks like. Simultaneously, they illustrate how institutionally-sanctioned processes of consultation with young people contributes to their silencing, emphasising the limitations of 'official' political channels for young people to express environmental care in the context of

their homes and communities (Hadfield-Hill and Christensen 2019). This points back towards those forms of political action – playful or otherwise – that exist outside of formal systems and which are based on and in young people’s own socio-cultural worlds as more effective mechanisms for their expressions of environmental care. In what sense, and in what ways, are young adults engaged in quiet, ‘behind-the-scenes’ political acts – described by Scott (1990) in terms of ‘infrapolitics’ and by O’Brien et al. (2018, citing El Khoury 2015) as propositional praxis – which do not visibly or conspicuously challenge power, but are still acts of dissent? Acknowledging the complex, mutually influencing relations that exist between household inhabitants, how much power can young people really exert through subtly doing things differently at home? This is important to consider in the context of the strength of familial norms and routines on shaping consumption within the material (infra)structures of home (Collins 2015). There is scope here to push understandings of young people’s power as geopolitical agents through analyses of how their activism emerges from and through the mundanities and responsibilities of domestic life. Further, this is an area of study which may reveal instructive contrasts and synergies between the activist-geopolitics of Global North and South, acknowledging the often strikingly different household realities through which young people’s activism emerge.

Cool Climate Care

The third context I consider is youth cultural space, specifically the intersections of the physical spaces discussed above and media space. The direct action of young people’s protest, particularly the School Strike For Climate, has been widely communicated through digital media channels, which have been argued to be fundamental to catalysing the scale and strength of these protests (Varghese 2019). Whether young people’s environmental care is the product or the driver of environmental protest, popular news coverage and emergent research suggest that environmental care is seen not just as socially acceptable amongst

youth, but as a widespread norm. In Global North contexts, this might even be seen as ‘cool’¹ (UN 2020; van der Voo 2019; BBC 2019; Thomas et al. 2019). However, despite its short-term benefits for attention-grabbing and awareness-raising, ‘coolness’ may present its own risks.

Being ‘cool’ has long been considered crucial to young people’s feelings of self-acceptance and social belonging (Skelton and Valentine 1998; Pedrozo 2011; Pedersen and Gram 2018), and as such it has considerable power to prompt ‘joining in’. Whilst this presents opportunities for young people to become enrolled in action for environmental care, how much is known about the reality of young environmental activists’ everyday lives, specifically the extent to which online identities reflect – or obscure – forms of personal consumption at odds with those online identities? For Global South activists, access to digital networks to mobilise action may present profound risks as well as opportunities. The use of such networks to gain attention and support may prove a double edged sword where personal visibility is both fundamental to the success of an activist project and a significant personal risk in national contexts where environmental activism can constitute a risk to life (Global Witness 2020). Such realities highlight crucial – as yet unexplored – spatial differences in the lived experience of activist mobilisation.

We might therefore ask when is publicly ‘joining in’ with environmental activism a mechanism for, or display of, actual personal or social change, potentially at significant personal cost or risk, and when is it a display of symbolic cultural capital tailored to the current socio-political climate? Today’s youth – particularly, but by no means exclusively, those in the Global North – are deeply cognisant of how the media gaze can be worked for

¹ The cultural relevance of ‘cool’ both as a term and as a descriptor of social validation amongst youth is something that, itself, requires careful reflection. Is this term still meaningful to C21st youth, or is it useful only as a shorthand for those who have moved past this life stage to describe the cultural valorization and status attribution processes characteristic of youth? Does the notion of ‘cool’ have global relevance, or is it a product of the status-making processes of cultures of the Global North?

personal and/or socio-political gain. Whilst this may sound cynical, we risk limiting our own critical gaze as scholars, not just on environmental activism, but the place of young lives within it, if we avoid considering the extent to which young people really are the haloed ‘sustainability saviours’ they are sometimes painted as (Collins and Hitchings 2012). To what extent is some young people’s environmental activism an ‘Insta-friendly’ trend, seen as ‘cool’ because of its dynamic, impactful photo opportunities, but ultimately at risk of being usurped by the next big issue or trend? How readily might ‘cool’ activist culture be appropriated by consumer culture (e.g. Slawter 2008)? How might a waning sense of ‘cool’ impact on the sustainability of young people’s environmental care? For Global South activists, the very notion of ‘cool’ may mean something else entirely. In places where environmental activism is a far riskier undertaking, how do young activists make use of networks, digital or otherwise, to maintain the focus and determination fundamental to efficacy, whilst mitigating the risk of being easily identifiable and located?

There are interesting questions to be asked, too, around the relative potency (as well as sustainability) of online versus ‘face-to-face’ activism. Loader (2008) questions whether online activism constitutes a weaker form of involvement than ‘face to face’ action, and Hemmi and Crowther’s (2013) participants, who were themselves involved in environmental action groups, suggested they viewed their online environmental activism as something short of ‘full activism’, which they saw in terms of ‘embodied engagement’ with the issues (p3). This, of course, is not to say that online activism isn’t hugely powerful in some important ways – O’Brien et al. (2018, 42) specifically note that it can contribute to, ‘information distribution, logistical support, participation fora, and “e-movements,” all of which can also play a role in radical politics.’ Nevertheless, the fact that it takes place behind a screen means that the living of everyday life – the choices within which are fundamental to the environmental credentials of a purported activist – remains invisible. For young people keen

to express environmental care but for whom the identity of an ‘activist’ does not fit, there remain risks which must be weighed up in the course of their environmental action. In what contexts can young people resist the instant social media ‘like’ in order to risk doing something different – and perhaps being ‘liked’ less as a result? Whitehouse (2014) shows how, for some young people, expressing environmental care at school is socially risky – something that I have also found in my recent research with young adults who have grown up in a village moving towards carbon neutrality. In such instances, perhaps engaging with environmental activism online is a pragmatic solution through which these young people can find a shared community of interest.

Indeed, communities of interest present a further, potentially revealing, space of enquiry into young people’s environmental activism. Scholarship focused on a range of outdoor pursuits, including surfing (Wheaton 2007), skateboarding (Vivoni 2013), skiing and snowboarding (Mihala 2019), and ‘critical mass bike rides’ (Williams 2018), has highlighted how these leisure practices can instil and express care for both natural and built environments. Here, environmental care forms part of a much broader suite of values which together embody the essence of that pursuit. Further, notions of ‘cool’ that are often associated with these activities tend to be characterised by intra-group commitment and respect, and are only partially driven by, or concerned with, the view of an external audience. What might be learned from the environmental care of these communities to illuminate the relationships between notions of ‘cool’, authenticity, and political action?

Concluding thoughts

There is a risk that young people’s environmental activism becomes both spectacularised and compartmentalised – framed as inspiring leadership, but leadership whose impacts are ultimately hard to pin down, or are doomed to exist in silos as a result of the invisible

boundaries that adults impose to circumscribe young adults' agency. The intersection of spaces of domestic geopolitics and the those of young people's activism, including interactions (successful or attempted) with formal power structures, thus emerges as a particularly fertile arena for future research. In their paper on young people's experiences of growing up in eco-communities, Hadfield-Hill and Christensen (2019, 6) highlight the 'political potential which emerges from spaces of liminality' as young people find the 'spaces between' in order to enact their agency and make their voices heard. These 'between-spaces' include the personal embodied actions that connect a site of protest, an Instagram post and decisions about what to eat or wear; the spaces and processes of negotiation as shared meanings of 'change' and 'success' are hammered out between activists in Stockholm, Kampala, Christchurch and Bogotá; and the cognitive processes that make sense of lifestyle changes wrought by new threats, such as a global pandemic. Geographers' sensitivity to how distinct spaces shape and influence each other positions them well to interrogate these between-spaces, or spaces of translation, in order to better understand how the success of young people's political endeavours is, or can be, realised. Given the challenges facing the young the world over as Covid-19 decimates economies and traditional transitional pathways to independent adulthood evaporate, researchers' attempts to enable young people's agency through understanding of its workings, and its stumbling blocks, has never been more important. Geographers of young people's worlds have a significant part to play in interrogating these spaces between activism, agency and impact.

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