Section overview

Understanding young people's citizenship: Marginalisation, agency and the political imagination

Luisa Enria[1]

REDEFINING 'CITIZENSHIP'

In 2015, the United Nations' World Youth Report highlighted civic engagement as a key component of its agenda on youth empowerment. In justifying its choice of focus, the report pointed to what it characterised as a 'trust crisis' between young people and their governments, as the latter had seemingly failed to address challenges such as soaring youth unemployment rates. In the face of such a crisis of trust, civic engagement was framed as a way for young people to take action for themselves, drawing on (among other concepts) the notion of 'engaged citizenship' to consider how 'political and civic identities are activated through engagement and influence in the public sphere' (United Nations, 2015: 18). This approach recognises that citizenship means more than a legal status, and the UN Report focuses particularly on young people's responsibility. Recent scholarship on citizenship has also turned to explore the qualitative nature of the relationship between the state and its citizens (Ong, 1996; Lazar, 2013; Lazar and Nuijten, 2013). In so doing, it has pointed to the varied political subjectivities, imaginaries and aspirations that emerge from everyday encounters with the state and

its representatives as well as from perception of state absence. Considering intersections between marginalisation and citizenship ideals and practices highlights for example how poverty might strip some citizens of any substantive rights or how gendered norms that govern and restrict the voices and activities of girls, women and gender nonconforming people, structure the possibilities of exercising citizenship rights in practice through formal channels. Not everyone, in other words, can become an 'engaged citizen' in the same way. At the same time, normative values of citizenship can co-exist with formal exclusion and are to be found among those who are not granted full rights or are not citizens at all. Kabeer (2005), for example, points to an emergent citizenship 'from below', based on her research among those with 'the status of lesser citizens or non-citizens' but who articulate values such as justice, recognition, self-determination and solidarity as key components of inclusive citizenship.

These expansive notions of what citizenship means – both as a set of expectations and as an engaged practice – are particularly significant for conceptualising young people's political participation in the Global South. 'Youth' itself can be understood as a political construct. Increasingly, 'youth' is recognised as a social category that is not entirely dependent on chronological age but rather a period of transition into adulthood that is defined through a set of context-specific social markers of status (Christiansen, Utas and Vigh, 2006b; Honwana, 2012). The social connotations of youth are in many ways politically determined, for example as transitions are protracted by policies that directly exclude young people from opportunities to become financially independent or that ignore young people's realities. In addition, this liminal stage denotes a specific type of relationship between young people and the state or prefigures a particular political positioning for young people. In public imaginations, young people have been framed as 'makers or breakers' – that is, as either leaders of the future or as dangerous disruptors (Honwana and De Boeck, 2005). Theories that posit a demographic 'youth bulge' as a security risk (Urdal, 2004), for example, capture policy-makers' imaginations, and youth-centred interventions (particularly in countries that have experienced conflict and are considered at risk of relapse) are justified as 'pacifiers' of a potentially rebellious and growing cohort in the youthful countries of the Global South. Despite the diversity of young people's lived experience, the notion of 'youth', particularly when associated with potential threat or hopes of future leadership, tends to be associated with young men. The term therefore often obscures experiences of adolescent girls and young women – we see this for example not only in a much more limited literature on female transitions to adulthood or their political mobilisation but also in the exclusion of women from demobilisation and disarmament

processes because militarised youth are expected to be male (Mazurana and McKay, 2001; Johnson-Hanks, 2002; Henshaw, 2020). Similarly, younger adolescents' opportunities for expressing their voices often fall through the cracks. No longer children and not yet adults, adolescents needs and experiences may not captured by formal avenues for civic engagement.

In contrast to these policy imaginations of youth as either threat to or hope for the future, young people fashion political identities for themselves, often in direct response to the reductive framings proposed by official narratives (Christiansen, Utas and Vigh, 2006a; Honwana, 2012). In the streets of Freetown, for example, young unemployed men making a living in the informal economy created associations that directly contrasted public imageries that framed them as dangerous. 'Did we do something wrong?' ('Nar bad we do?') became the association's slogan (Enria, 2018). Similarly, in an exploration of popular music by Luo youth in Kenya, Prince (2006) shows how pop songs were used to express experiences of AIDS that contrasted medicalised and often stigmatising official narratives, in an effort to find their own ways of responding to the epidemic. Young people's activism, political participation and civic engagement have taken a wide range of guises: from direct action and climate activism to formal inclusion in international bodies or national parliaments, and even uprisings and oppositional (including occasionally violent) political confrontation (United Nations, nd; Iwilade, 2014; Nakabuye, Nirere and Oladosu, 2020).

Developing a nuanced picture of young people's civic engagement today thus requires empirical insights to highlight the context-specific nature of citizenship practices, the spectrum of opportunities that young men and women have available to them and that they create, and the varied notions of citizenship that emerge from young people's experiences. This includes engaging with the ways in which the experiences and possibilities of citizenship vary across lines such as class, race, gender and other politically salient identities and socioeconomic backgrounds. In addition, if citizenship is to be explored as a relationship between citizens and the state or as a distinct political subjectivity and set of values and norms that emerge from encounters with the state, we must also differentiate young people's experiences across different political systems. In postcolonial societies, for example, it is especially important to consider how imperial rule shaped state–society relations, as 'gatekeeper' economies geared towards extraction and forms of indirect rule in parts of British West and East Africa resulted in the establishment of a shallow social contract with long-term implications for postcolonial institution-building (Mamdani, 1996; Cooper, 2019). In Sierra Leone, for example, the foundations of a conflict that has been dubbed a 'crisis of youth' can be found (at least partly) in

grievances against a chieftaincy system originally designed to uphold indirect rule (Peters, 2011). The system enhanced the power of chiefs and their hold on rural societies, including as they mobilised young people's free community labour and controlled their access to economic resources such as entry to the diamond fields in the east of the country. These types of intergenerational power dynamics as well as age-based social hierarchies also preclude young people's expression and political participation, further exacerbating their marginalisation.

Similarly, young people's role in processes of decolonisation, and particularly student activism and anti-colonial imaginations, contributed to the shaping of post-imperial polities. As Hodgkinson and Melchiorre (2019) note, taking historical legacies seriously also means contending with the impacts of structural adjustment and the recessions of the 1980s and 1990s on the space available for political organisation in the aftermath of empire. In more recent years, the emergence of social media and new ways for young people to communicate and share ideas was hailed as revolutionary, and the early days of the Arab Spring seemed to confirm these labels. However, the violent suppression of these movements and growing questions about the dangers that social media might pose to democracy have reinforced the need to explore the multitude of structural and systemic factors that order the terrains that young people navigate as they seek opportunities to engage and articulate their political opinions and identities. As we engage with structural realities, and explore how young people navigate them, we must also consider questions of epistemic justice that young people themselves have brought to the fore – for example, through their participation in movements to decolonise education, or their production of abolitionist, feminist and anti-racist political imageries and new forms of protest that call into question and re-imagine the foundations of the contemporary neoliberal status quo. These have included for example movements of young people to protest the violence of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad of the Nigerian Police Force (protests known as #endSARS), which became a catalyst for broader mobilisation around dissatisfaction with the contemporary political settlement (Uwazuruike, 2020; Dambo et al., 2022) and more recent mobilisation by young Ugandans against the consequences of climate change (Nakabuye, Nirere and Oladosu, 2020). Similarly, as Ramaru (2017) notes, the Rhodes Must Fall movement calling for decolonisation of the University (discussed further below), starting in South Africa, also included powerful reflections by young activists about the intersections of decolonisation and feminism.

Taking these considerations as a starting point, this introduction sets the scene for the empirical chapters that follow by raising three key questions:

1 How can we characterise the relationship between marginalisation and citizenship?
2 How do we locate and understand young people's agency and political voice?
3 How can we broaden conceptions of the 'political' to embrace the different lived experiences of citizenship across contexts?

In drawing out these theoretical and normative questions, the introduction calls for renewed attention to young people's diverse political imagination, even if this is not or cannot be translated into action or forms of resistance and civic engagement that are tangible and recognisable as such. The introduction summarises the chapters in this section and their contribution to an intersectional and contextual and empirically grounded approach to studying this broadened vision of youth citizenship and civic engagement.

POLITICAL LIVELIHOODS: MARGINALISATION AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Debates on young people's civic engagement take, as a point of departure, the notion that youth is a moment of transition – both as a time not only of opportunity but also of liminality that comes with a process of 'becoming' (Christiansen, Utas and Vigh, 2006a). Across the world, however, economic stagnation and growing inequality have meant that these transitions are protracted, with young people delayed or denied entry into adulthood, which has implications for citizenship practices and identities (Finlay et al., 2010). Policy-makers' concern with these truncated transitions has been primarily framed around preoccupation with the security implications of 'youth bulges'(Urdal, 2004). Contrasting this 'securitisation of youth', scholars have explored how marginalisation and exclusion influence young people's political trajectories. This work has emphasised that having one's opportunities for achieving social recognition (e.g. through financial independence) foreclosed, influences young people's political subjectivities and the possibility for youthful collective organising (Dawson, 2014b, 2014a; Nunzio, 2014; Enria, 2018; Oosterom, 2019). In drawing this connection between structural forces of socioeconomic exclusion on the one hand and political agency on the other, this approach encourages us to differentiate young people's trajectories, pointing not only to intergenerational inequity but also diversity between young people's experiences, for example between younger and older youth, young men and young women, citizens and non-citizens and so on.

Experiences of unemployment have been particularly central to understanding young people's 'subjectivities in the making' (Salemink, Bregnbæk

and Hirslund, 2018). Limited opportunities for formal and gainful employment place young people in limbo as they struggle to gain the financial means to achieve socially sanctioned adulthood. This is particularly significant for 'youth' in the older cohort. While for adolescents, physical changes and transitions from early childhood are more distinctive, access to employment becomes increasingly integral to older youths' sense of self and their place in society. Variously characterised as 'waithood' (Honwana, 2012, p. 3), 'blocked transitions to adult life' (Utas, 2003: 6), 'timepass' (Jeffrey, 2010: 5), a period of being 'stuck' (Sommers, 2012) or even 'social death' (Vigh, 2006a: 106), 'youth' tends to be defined by what is lacking. Indeed, Argenti (2008) goes as far as to wonder whether youth is a meaningful social category at all if it is primarily characterised by what it is not. However, it is important not to be overly deterministic in our assessment of how social and particularly economic forces shape young people's lives. As Berents and McEvoy-Levy (2015) note, far from being passive victims, young people make political meaning out of their predicament, and the very experience of 'waithood' generates specific identities. Christiansen et al. (2006), for example, in their discussion of 'youth(e)scapes', not only point out how 'youthhood' is experienced as a condition to be escaped but they also place ethnographic emphasis on how young people navigate social, political and economic exclusion. For some, such as the lower middle-class Indian students whose lives Jeffrey (2010) describes in *Timepass*, a shared experience of waiting (when education did not translate into access to jobs) created distinctive socialities and avenues for political mobilisation. As Abebe (2020) notes, drawing on Butler's assertion that precarity is a politically induced condition, it is important to see 'waithood' as a material reality that is a result of political failures to create opportunities for young people. As such, as Di Nunzio (2019) rightly points out, waiting is not a luxury that is open to everyone; in the face of overall high unemployment rates for young people, class, education, gender, race, ethnicity and other axes of inequality will determine different young people's experiences of liminality and, consequently, the political possibilities and imageries available to them. In other words, we must consider the novel and diverse ways in which different forms of marginalisation give rise to their own meaningful expressions of political identity and avenues for political engagement. At the same time, these axes of exclusion may also foreclose opportunities for political organising. In Chapter 21 on the Qeerroo youth movement in Ethiopia, for example, Jones et al. describe the challenges of female participation. Despite the establishment of a female wing of the movement, the Qaree, gendered expectations of women's domestic roles meant they could not participate equally.

It is therefore important to tread lightly as we explore the balance between structural forces and political agency, and to remember that not all young people are marginalised and not all are marginalised in the same way, as we try to account for the diverse ways in which political subjectivities and even forms of resistance emerge from collective experiences of socio-economic exclusion. In addition, as Wood (2017) cautions in her review of the youth studies literature, we must be cognisant of the dynamic and context-specific nature of youth citizenship, as its expressions change over time and across place. This must include paying attention to how young people mobilise in response to the specificities of the political systems and patterns of inclusion/exclusion that they face. While forces such as neoliberal economic reform have been global, they have had diverse impacts on young people's political lives. Studies of how certain forms of exclusion create political identities and voice have explored (for example) how informality influences political subjectivities and collective organising (Lindell, 2010; Thieme, 2013, 2018; Di Nunzio, 2019). In the face of significant barriers to entering the formal labour market, young people across the Global South make their livelihoods in a sprawling informal economy. From street trading to different forms of 'hustling', 'street economies' have been shown to provide much more than an income (however precarious); they also provide a way of life and opportunities to create social ties. Tracing the political contours of informality begins with an acknowledgement that existence in the informal economy often profoundly shapes one's relationship with the state. Efforts to curtail and control the informal sector – playing out occasionally in violent confrontations, criminalisation and heavy-handed policing (e.g. of street trading) – position young people in an oppositional relationship to state authorities (see for example Skinner, 2008). At the same time, the informal sector creates distinctive 'occupational identities' (Bryceson, 2010), particularly in urban settings, giving rise to new moral economies and affective relations that anthropologists previously studied in rural societies. For example, in a volume on *Africa's Informal Workers*, Lindell and colleagues (2010) chronicled the vibrant and diverse ways in which those engaged in the informal economy have organised based on their shared economic identity and experience of exclusion from formal opportunities (or what Bryceson (2010) terms 'failed occupationality'). In emphasising the political dimensions of the informal, they point to a large spectrum of organising possibilities, differentiated by structure and level of organisation as well as by gender, ethnicity and financial standing. They also distinguish between strategic engagement with powerful actors, from 'exit' (that is, efforts to escape the purview of the state) to 'voice', as informal associations actively engage with the political system. The internal dynamics of informal

associations are also significant for understanding young people's standing. In Sierra Leone for example, intergenerational power dynamics in market women and commercial bike riders' associations meant that that younger members felt silenced, unable to influence the nature of engagement with the state or to forestall forms of co-option discussed in more detail below (Enria, 2018).

These young people's experiences also render visible the fact that collective organising is not always an option. Indeed, recognising the relationship between material deprivation and civic engagement requires first noting the implications of how poverty influences access to and experience of citizenship rights (Harris, 2015). Narayan et al. (2000) argue that poverty manifests itself in a lack of voice, or even humiliation and assaults on dignity, as well as stigma and powerlessness. The very forces that exclude young people from labour markets are the same that make political organisation structurally difficult. Asking who gets to speak or organise, and with what effects, cautions against romanticising civil society and young people's civic engagement and encourages us to also observe patterns of exclusion even within youth-led organisations. We see this for example in this section's chapter on the Qeerroo movement exclusion of female members. Staeheli et al. (2014) explore the industry that has sprung up around citizenship promotion through non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Lebanon, Bosnia-Herzegovina and South Africa, and Staeheli and Hammett (2013) question how citizenship education creates ideals of a unified nation in contexts where legacies of oppression and violence continue to shape young people's everyday lives. This is most starkly visible in self-organised, youth-led political movements that offer instead an oppositional critique of state-sanctioned visions of nationhood. A good example of this is the 'Fallist' movement that began in 2016 in South Africa, which saw students demanding that statues of colonialists such as Cecil Rhodes be removed from university campuses as part of a broader campaign to demand the decolonisation of education (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). Struggles for epistemic justice, and particularly for a national reckoning with colonial pasts, have shown how youth civic engagement can force a radical reimagination of citizenship and belonging to the nation. However, the long-term viability of these movements also depends on the broader political opportunity structure. As Mudimu and Mpisane (2021) note, the 'Fallist' movement in South Africa became fragmented partly due to pressure from political parties on their representatives within student councils. Indeed, there are many examples of efforts to delegitimise and manipulate youth movements, such as allegations about funding of the Senegalese movement *Y'en a Marre (Fed Up)* that were used to undermine its legitimacy as a grassroots campaign (Ndiaye, 2021), or attempts to

create internal struggle within social movements in post-Arab Spring Egypt to strengthen the effectiveness of repressive tactics (Sika, 2019).

Opportunities to organise also require resources. As Maganga (2020) notes, in a reflection on youth-led protests in Africa in the shadow of the Arab Spring, achieving meaningful structural change is extremely difficult without effective resourcing of organisational structures. In other contexts, authoritarian rule and suppression of protest similarly limit the space for political organising, while everyday struggles for survival in competitive informal markets undermine collective identity formation (Enria, 2018). In the absence of opportunities for collective organisation to directly contest structural violence and marginalisation of certain categories of young people, some have sought to identify more subtle forms of resistance and political expression. We may find inspiration for such an analysis (for example) in Bayat's (2010) work on the 'quiet encroachment of the ordinary' in Egypt and beyond. Taking cities as key sites for observing everyday politics, Bayat encourages us to see the significance of 'social nonmovements' and the political implications of poor people's impinging on the powerful by inhabiting urban spaces. The urban poor, he shows us, engage in constant negotiations for survival which – though not explicitly a form of political collective action – enact a politics of presence, making claims on spaces and public goods. Looking for politics in the everyday has long been a fruitful exercise, as scholars such as Scott (1985) identified what he termed 'weapons of the weak' among Malaysian peasants who, in the absence of avenues for mobilisation, would find other ways to express dissent such as feigned ignorance, false compliance or desertion. In these small acts, Scott sees efforts to 'resist marginalisation' and to gain dignity as citizens (p. xv).

LOCATING AGENCY AND THE POLITICAL IMAGINATION: TENSIONS AND RESOLUTIONS

These efforts to locate the political in the everyday and particularly in the streets, where young people especially congregate in search of a living, have succeeded in expanding the scope of political agency beyond formal organisation. For our purposes, they offer important entry points to explore the interrelations between marginalisation and civic engagement, identifying citizenship practices even in spaces that are limited by structural constraints. There are, however, potential analytical and political dangers if we inscribe political intention in all aspects of everyday life, as we risk imposing our structures of meaning on young people's livelihoods. Similarly, we must be wary of overstating the agency – and particularly resistance – of young

people who are marginalised and make space for limited or even contradictory forms of political engagement (di Nunzio, 2019).

The question of agency and the space for resistance is particularly challenging when we turn to less 'palatable' forms of political engagement. Normative approaches to citizenship, as reproduced (for example) in civic education, tend to imagine particular kinds of state–society relations through an idealised notion of civic society and an active citizen that interacts with state institutions. What do we make then of 'uncivil' forms of engagement (Fatton, 1995; Berman, 1998)? This is clearest in research on young people's involvement in armed conflict for example or other forms of political violence. Utas (2003: 6) for example points to how processes of marginalisation and abjection, or 'blocked paths to adult futures', played a role in the enlistment of youth combatants in the Liberian civil war. In Chapter 28 elsewhere in this volume, 'Aous' reflects on how the socioeconomic conditions in the Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon where he lives intersect with the absence of outlets for political voice, driving the participation of young men like himself in militarised factions. Similarly, research on youth involvement in gangs traces how socialites lived out through criminality are responses to and critiques of socio-political exclusion as much as they are an effort to find recognition and belonging that is precluded through other channels (Mitton, 2022). Perhaps even more troubling and analytically complex is the question of the co-option of young people by political actors. As political entrepreneurs infiltrate young people's spaces, recruiting them for political campaigning or blunting the force of their independent organising, what are we to make of those young people's agency? For example, Chapter 19 by Hunter and colleagues in this section, we see their collaborator, Lamptey, simultaneously critiquing a political system that bars him from voting and which he implicates in the reproduction of his marginalisation, and agreeing to campaign through a bodypainting performance for that party in exchange for money. We are left wondering whether the choice he makes can be seen as meaningfully agentive, and how to parse the seeming contradiction. There is undoubtedly a risk in imputing agency on a situation that may not only be exploitative but also directly contribute to reproducing patterns of oppression. For the authors, this is a paradox but one that nonetheless shows young people's efforts to perform citizenship and belonging through the avenues that are available to them.

The case of co-option is particularly important to consider because it forces us to question what we mean by 'exclusion'. Being recruited in a political campaign is a form of inclusion but one that may be characterised as 'adverse incorporation' – that is, a form of inclusion whereby people are

'obliged to manage… vulnerability through investing in and maintaining forms of social capital which produce desirable short-term, immediate outcomes and practical needs' (Wood, 2000: 18) while at the same time being exploitative and foreclosing more emancipatory forms of inclusion. For Roy (2018), a 'politics of the poor' can encompass a patchwork of practices. This can encourage us to see how a range of subjectivities and actions may be inhabited simultaneously even if they are contradictory or if they undermine efforts at more meaningful inclusion.

A more expansive understanding of youth political engagement and citizenship thus requires us to reckon with these complexities, to make space for the real constraints to effective, emancipatory organising, for the diversity and intersectionality of young people's experiences and how these influence their political subjectivities, and for the multitude of ways in which young people engage with the political system, including when they are violent or 'adverse'. In returning to the age-old question about structure and agency, Vigh's (2006b) research of young men who were former combatants in Guinea Bissau proposes the framework of 'navigation' as a way to understand how young people make their way through the troubled waters of economic and political systems stacked against them, while maintaining efforts to steer their way through within those constraints. Applying this to an understanding of political navigations means, as di Nunzio argues for his interlocutors in Ethiopia, to move away 'from either celebrating the inherent capacity of the oppressed to resist… or, alternatively, closing the circle to state that attempts to live through the condition of oppression and subjugation simply end up reproducing the condition' (di Nunzio 2019: 214–215). Instead, we can pay attention to everyday efforts to find respect, to chart a livelihood, manage uncertainty and imagine the future. These efforts can form the foundations of a distinctive political imagination that is rooted in the context-specific experience of youthhood, and the specific ways in which young people inhabit that social category and which consciously articulates an 'otherwise', as political and social alternatives (Enria, 2021).

This is distinct from viewing life itself as politics, or mere presence in the streets as a political act. Rather, it is a call to pay attention to the political imageries and possibilities that young people explicitly articulate even if these do not correspond to the actions they take as they attempt to navigate their current realities, to see how they re-imagine 'the game' even as they attempt to play it. This can include, for example, an appreciation of what hopes of migration and imaginations of 'elsewhere' tell us about the here and now, as we see in the piece by Elizabeth Dessie about gendered notions of alternative

> ### ▶ BOX 18.1 DISCUSSION QUESTIONS
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> - How does the lived experience of adolescents and young people in the Global South shape their political imagination? What consequences do these positionings have for how different groups of young people see themselves, and how they imagine and practice citizenship?
> - How do we account for the forces that create different forms of social, economic and political exclusions across different settings to determine young people's positioning vis-à-vis the state?
>
> - How do we identify and understand different forms of resistance? What do we make of less 'palatable' forms of belonging and collective action? Why are adolescent and young people's political movements often at risk of co-optation and manipulation by institutional political actors? What are the implications of this for social change?
> - What role do gender inequalities play in shaping the participation, voice and agency of adolescent girls and young women?

citizenship among rural migrants in Addis Ababa (see Chapter 20). There, young women's radically different experiences of navigating informal spaces mean that they see migration as the only opportunity for a better life, punctuating their explicit critique of the status quo in their country.

Young people's imaginations may not correspond to the liberal visions imbued through civic education; they may, for example, rely on different affective repertoires and moral economies. Giving weight to young people's political imaginations, their critiques, hopes and expectations allows us to make sense of seeming contradiction and to expand our vision of what citizenship practices look like beyond the normative visions of Western liberal democracy.

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NOTE

1 This chapter draws on a review of the literature and the author's ethnographic fieldwork with unemployed young men and women in Freetown between 2010 and 2017 (see Enria 2018 and Enria 2021).

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