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Youth and Democratic Citizenship:
Key Concepts

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Youth and Democratic Citizenship: Key Concepts

Tan Ern Ser

Defining youth

Has there always been a lifecycle stage called youth? And if so, when does youthhood begin and when does it transit to adulthood. According to Berger and Berger (1976:239), youth is "neither a biological nor a legal fact … it is a matter of social definition". They also observe that the "global tendency is for youth to begin earlier and earlier, and to last longer and longer" (Berger and Berger, 1976:240).

Significantly, youth is often defined as an antithesis to the uptightness characteristic of bureaucratic order and discipline. It emerges to the extent to which a sharp cleavage in value orientations exists between the family and the larger institutions of society.   It is created by the institutional separation or differentiation and accompanying specialization brought about by industrialization, which entails a long period spent within the educational system. The resulting division between the generations led to "deliberate opposition to the definitions of reality prevailing in the parent generation," and, correspondingly, young people's search for "authentic" values and identity.

More generally, "youth culture stands in massive opposition to the social-cultural status quo, or even that it represents the future of the society." Berger and Berger (1976:240) also argue that youth culture vigorously affirms community as well as "the autonomy of each individual and his right 'to do his own thing' to the limits of possibility."

The above view suggests a more activist political orientation in which the struggle is in the realm of values. It is also possible that youth may react to their political and economic marginalization and disenfranchisement, and seek revenge against perceived injustices. Yet another perspective suggests that politics is "not pivotal in the same way as school-to-work and family transitions" (Roberts, 2003:18). The question to be considered here is whether or not young people would be motivated to clamor for change in their life conditions, and whether their vision of the future society is a democratic one.

Youth and democracy

Whatever the case may be, youth constitute the future of society and perhaps democracy as well. They possess the potential to challenge non-democratic regimes and institutions, or, if a democratic transition has already taken place, help consolidate democracy in the nation of which they are citizens. But this potential would remain unrealized should they be distracted by--or attracted to--non-democratic competitors, or if they lack the capacity to contribute to democratic citizenship.

No simple trade-off between democracy and its competitors

The choice between democracy and its competitors, however, involves some trade-offs, such as that between economic development and political freedom, at least in the short run. Moreover, where young people have not learned the qualities of democratic citizenship, they are unlikely to become "democrats capable of expressing informed and coherent support for democracy" (Shin, 2012:223).

Democracy is still the better option

In short, there are justifications for supporting non-democratic competitors of democracy; but, according to Siegel, Weinstein, and Halpern (2004:71), the stronger argument is that democracy is better able to deliver economic development than autocrat political structures, which are prone to corruption, conflict and oppression. More importantly, Shin observes that where democracy flourishes, it also contributes to democratic learning, thereby producing citizens who possess authentic conceptions of democracy as well as the capacity for democratic citizenship (Shin, 2012:238-9).

Post-modernization as a source of value shift towards democracy

Shin's argument raises an interesting puzzle: If democracy begets democratic leanings, then what conditions beget democracy? Inglehart's (1997) response is that post-modernization has led to a fundamental value shift which favors democracy. Essentially, his theory suggests that pos-modernization brings about "declining respect for authority and growing emphasis on participation and self-expression" and that these trends are "conducive to democratization in authoritarian societies and to more elite-challenging, issue-oriented, and direct form of democracy in already-democratic societies" (Inglehart and Welzel, 2008:43).

Persistence of traditional values

While Inglehart has introduced a rather elegant theory which explains the advent of democracy following modernization, one may question if the process of modernization—and post-modernization—inevitably leads to the decline of traditional values and converges around some set of common values, including the ones supportive of democracy. His answer is that cultural change is "path dependent', which means that "different societies follow different trajectories even when subject to the same forces of modernization" (Inglehart and Welzel, 2008:19-21).

Is Asian Values incompatible with democracy?

That traditional values could persist in the face of modernization may suggest that they could influence the way people view democracy and its competitors, and the extent to which they support democracy and reject authoritarianism. If this is so, there may be a case for agreeing with the proponents of the Asian Values Thesis.

Indeed, Shin (2012:312) has found that "socioeconomic modernization in Confucian Asia is most likely to expand the family of non-liberal democrats—defined as those who support democracy as a system, but not as a process (Shin, 2012:288)--among young people in their 20s and 30s". However, even as Shin suggests that there is "credible support for the Incompatibility Thesis, which emphasizes the incompatibility of Confucianism with liberal democracy" (2012:311), he points out that "Confucian countries are not alike in reacting to the forces of socioeconomic modernization and political modernization", and that he is confident that "democratic learning" will contribute to and benefit from democratic regime change (2012:313).

Authoritarian regimes are vulnerable to crisis of legitimacy, and thereby produce conditions favorable to democracy

A somewhat different take is that adopted by Nathan (2012). In his review essay on Shin's recent book, Nathan argues, quite vehemently, that traditional values "melt away when people move to cities, gain literacy, experience formal education, work in modern enterprises, and engage with modern media" (2012:137). He reasons that it is not "Asian Values" that cause people to support authoritarianism, but that authoritarian regimes could cultivate illiberal values among their citizens, and they are more successful in doing so with the help of their vibrant economic performance (Nathan, 2012:138). In short, regime performance in terms of economic development, aided by propaganda, can result in a situation in which the presence of Asian Values is misconstrued as the independent variable, thereby conveying the impression and self-serving argument that Confucian culture is incompatible with liberal democracy.

Nathan also raises an interesting observation that authoritarian systems are more vulnerable to crises of legitimacy than democratic systems. The implication here is that where an authoritarian regime is unable to meet the economic needs of citizens, it would come under pressure from citizens demanding that it becomes "more like their (democratic) neighbors" (Nathan, 2012:139). In short, erosion of traditional values, together with poor economic performance, can combine to hasten the arrival of democracy.

Regime performance matters

However, the transition to democracy is not without difficulties. Where a fledgling democracy fails to deliver good performance, it runs the risk of losing the commitment of citizens to democracy.

Chu, Nathan, Diamond, and Shin (2008:24) argue that democracy "as an abstract idea is widely embraced, (but) not so many people endorsed it as the preferred form of government under all circumstances, and few preferred it to economic development". By the same token, they pointed out that "in societies where people have experienced a variant of soft authoritarianism that was efficacious in delivering social stability and economic development, democracy will have a difficult time winning people's hearts" (Chu, Nathan, Diamond, Shin, 2008:23).

What is democratic citizenship?

(The answers annotated here are distilled from Beetham (2005:40-41), a useful primer on democracy.

Democratic citizenship has three key related components: associational activity, broader culture of public involvement, and the personal characteristics appropriate to public involvement.

Associational activity facilitates participants learning to co-operate with others, developing organizational skills, and the ability to resolve differences through discussion.

Achieving results will increase people's confidence in their own effectiveness and in the value of acting together.

Democratic citizenship both serves to sustain and is itself the product of a democratic system. The free conditions of democracy, according to Tocqueville, encourage the associational life of civil society to flourish…but the experience of that in turn makes people highly resistant to any attempts at despotism.

To inculcate democratic citizenship, democratic educators are keen that their students should be able to participate in the governance of their class, school or college, and to be actively involved in projects in the wider community; not just learn about 'civics' as another curriculum subject.

Research Questions

1. How does one define "youth"? Perhaps, "youth" is not about age, but about a condition. Rossi (2009:472) suggests that there is a "youth condition".
2. Is this "youth condition" shaped by post-modernization and/or by poor economic performance of authoritarian regimes?
3. How does the practice of democracy promote democratic learning, and the inculcation of democratic citizenship?
4. Are young people more likely to reject authoritarianism and support democracy?
5. Do young people possess authentic conceptions of democracy?
6. Are young people liberal or illiberal democrats?
7. How can young people help to usher in democratic change?
8. What would it take to produce liberal democrats with the capacity for democratic citizenship?

9. Do young people support soft authoritarianism over democratic regimes which fail to perform in economic and/or political terms?
10. Are there factors, such as nationalism, religion, poor economic conditions, and perceived external threats, which may tilt young people's leaning towards authoritarian alternatives?

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