Future Perfect: Sedimented Temporalities of Youth and Citizenship in Post-Conflict Societies

Lynn Staeheli (Lynn.Staeheli@durham.ac.uk)

David Jones Marshall (David.marshall@durham.ac.uk)

Department of Geography, Durham University, Lower Mountjoy, South Road
Durham, DH1 3LE, UK

15 August 2014
“…the prefix ‘post’ signifies a formation that is *temporally after but not over* that to which it is affixed. ‘Post’ indicates a very particular condition of afterness in which what is past is not left behind, but, on the contrary, relentlessly conditions, even dominates a present that nevertheless also breaks in some way with this post. In other words, we use the term ‘post’ only for a present whose past continues to capture and structure it.”

Wendy Brown (2010, p. 21, emphasis in original)

Young people are a particular focus of post-conflict studies and of efforts on the part of international organizations to foster recovery and reconciliation. At a purely pragmatic level, young people are often disproportionately affected by conflicts, as the evidence emerging from Gaza suggests. But it is also because youth, and children in particular, are thought to face greater trauma and to have fewer resources to deal with it, and so can suffer consequences from it for the rest of their lives (see Marshall, 2014). Wars and other conflicts also disrupt – even decimate – economies and education systems, meaning that young people may despair of a future because of what has happened in the past. Many of these issues may be particularly difficult in the aftermath of internal conflicts or civil wars. In these cases, distrust, fear and animosities may simmer under the surface, even as young people claim to want to focus on the present and future. As one young Bosnian woman told us, “I don’t want to talk about the war. I am done with it!”

It is in this context that international democracy consultants, aid workers, and youth professionals have coalesced to attend to the needs of youth as the societies and countries in which they live emerge from conflict. We have elsewhere described these networks as the ‘citizenship industry.’ Among the ‘needs’ to which these networks attend are intercultural dialogue, conflict resolution, peace and reconciliation, and understanding human rights. Networks of NGOs offer training workshops to help young people learn those skills and to put them to use in projects that work across difference. Alongside these efforts are other programmes – sometimes offered by the same NGOs – that teach leadership skills, research
and problem-solving techniques to ‘empower’ young people to address the problems brought about by war and the crippling unemployment and social problems the countries often face. They do this under the mantle of promoting ‘active citizenship.’ The NGOs themselves often provide a sort of model for this, as many of them are run by youth and frequently employ young people who have gone through their programmes. Indeed, roughly half of our NGO respondents ‘qualify’ as youth in the countries in which they work.

NGOs involved in both kinds of programming are particularly concerned about youth for a mix of reasons: some talk about young people as being the ‘citizens of the future’; others talk about the ways that youth can lead their communities out of entrenched divisions because they were not implicated – were victims, rather than protagonists – in the conflict; others note that youth are the next generation in line to take leadership roles, particularly when there is a ‘missing generation’ killed in the war; and finally, because young people can be enrolled in solving problems now, before their careers and families take over. Each of these reasons invokes a kind of temporality: youth are the future, their connection to the past is innocent; they can take action now. To paraphrase, and perhaps extend, an argument recently made by Nicola Ansell and colleagues (2014), young people are always ‘being’ and ‘becoming’, but have also ‘been’.

The temporality of youth, however, is complicated, and does not proceed in a linear fashion from past to present to future. The rationales given by NGOs for focusing on youth hint at this complicated temporality. Instead, past, present, and future are entangled, and the past is sedimented in ways that make it part of the present and future. And that is why it is so difficult for NGOs and youth workers to chart a course for the kinds of citizenship they might wish to strive for. NGOs others in the citizenship industry disagree about the ways to address the past, or indeed, even whether to address the past when working with young people. Furthermore, many young people are fed up with the past. They are angry with politicians, and often their families, for their roles in waging war and blocking attempts to move beyond it. But many of these same young people see no future.

In this paper, we offer no solutions to the question of how to deal with the past in reconciliation efforts, nor do we propose a way to understand temporality in efforts to promote citizenship. Instead, we examine the complex temporalities that young people and NGOs both face and construct. We rely on the notion of ‘sedimentation’ in which different temporalities, histories, and spatialities are layered, creating ‘webs of habits’ that shape youth’s actions and the kinds of citizenship that might be constructed and enacted. We draw on information gathered as part of an on-going project on youth and citizenship in divided societies that focuses on the work of what we are calling the citizenship industry in Lebanon,
Bosnia-Herzegovina, and South Africa. Our argument to this point is primarily conceptual, but in illustrating it, we draw on interviews with youth and NGOs in the three countries.

**Sedimented Temporalities**

We have hinted at our argument above, but in this section, we elaborate our understanding of temporality and the ways that past, present and future can exist simultaneously in the experience of young people; in subsequent sections, we will explore this using the example of the ways that NGOs and youth organizations often attempt to disrupt or loosen those sedimentations. For now, however, we outline our approach to temporality in three steps, using memory as an example.

First, we want to highlight the relationship between temporality and experiences of young people. Much of the discussion about temporality in youth studies has focused on questions of transition, taking an implicitly developmental approach (see Jeffrey, 2010). There is often attention, for instance, to the ‘becomingness’ of youth as they transition into what may or may not be an autonomous adulthood (e.g., Horton and Krafl, 2006). While much of the youth transitions literature has been advanced in social psychology and education and has focused on individuals, there has been growing appreciation of the need to situate youth in social relationships, such as those of family, community, the political economy. In so doing, much of this work has used the experiences of youth to highlight the interplay, the entanglements of being and becoming. Importantly, much of the emphasis has been on the *experience* of those entanglements at a given moment and into the future. We can see evidence of this in the organizations we have worked with, and even their deliberate attempt to create those entanglements. For example, many organizations attempt to prepare youth for the future by encouraging them to get involved in their communities now.

Underlying these efforts is an expectation that taking action now will sediment the habit of participation and active citizenship that will stay with youth into the future; this is the second element of our argument. Our understanding of sedimentation and habits draws from the work of the pragmatist philosopher John Dewey and from the feminist anthropologist Shannon Sullivan. According to Dewey (1922), habits are practices that are learned through the social environment. Once learnt, these shape expectations for the future, implying a relatively straightforward notion of temporality. Sullivan (2001) reworks and extends this argument. Like Dewey, she believes that habits are expressed in practice(s). Through practice, habits become sedimented. Because each person engages and is influenced by multiple practices, including those of other people, habits are layered onto and entangled with other practices, other sedimentations, other meanings. The interaction between these layered,
sedimented habits lends an unpredictability and a plasticity to experiences and gives rise to complex meanings. As we understand the work of the NGOs and youth workers that we have interviewed, much of their effort is directed at loosening the sedimentations associated with what they might call ‘bad habits’ – such as intolerance, a lack of care for others – so that ‘good habits’ might take hold. To foreshadow our argument, however, they fear that their work will also be ‘loosened’ by the influence of habits encouraged by families, communities, and other sedimentations of habits.

In these efforts, though, the past plays an active, living role in shaping habits, experiences, and expectations of the future; this is the third component of our argument about sedimented temporalities. We have already noted that the sedimentation of habits includes experiences and practices rooted in the past, but we want to broaden this a bit and link it to memory. There is a large and growing literature on memory, trauma, and the politics of collective memory that is concerned with how memory can be managed in the process of rebuilding societies after conflicts have ended; the concern is that memories will reinforce habits – such as habits of fear, loathing, and revenge – and that they will be transferred across generations, reinvigorating trauma and ‘bad’ habits, even amongst people who did not directly experience the conflict (Hirsch, 2008). Craig Larkin (2012) analyses the experience of these transfers using the concept of ‘memoryscapes.’ His focus is on a generation of youth in Lebanon who actively remember and forget the trauma of the country’s civil war and other conflicts. Even though young people may not have lived through the war, the war is continually experienced by and narrated to them through the landscape, through family stories, through the silences and absence of people who died, and through the ways they navigate the city and neighbourhoods to avoid certain areas. Various discussed in terms of ‘trangenerational transfers’ (Hirsch, 2008), ‘knowledge in the blood’ (Jansen, 2009), or ‘socio-biographical memory’ (Zerubavel, 2003), the past exerts an influence on practices and experiences – habits, in our terms – in complex ways. And it is never fully or merely in the past, but instead is sedimented and entangled with other habits, experiences, practices, and meanings. From the perspective of organizations attempting to create new habits of citizenship, the entanglements of different temporalities and memories sedimented in social relations and in the very fabric of the city is a central challenge.

Creating new memories, new habits?

Many organizations associated with the citizenship industry are actively involved in such efforts to create new memories and encourage those new memories to form the basis for new habits. Yet this is a contentious process. Some organizations we spoke to in Lebanon, for instance, worried that Lebanon’s youth and future were hobbled because the country had not
yet had an ‘objective analysis’ of the civil war and its trauma (interview, 29 May, 2013). Such worries reflect concerns raised by Misztal (2003) that conflict can be submerged without being resolved; without resolution, vitriol and vengeance can suddenly appear – bellying passions that seem to have been quieted and apparent habits of co-existence. Against those claims, which argue for surfacing memories and replacing them with new ones are concerns that it may be ‘too soon’ to address such memories directly. In Bosnia, for instance, the

OSCE recommends that the war should not be discussed in high school history classes. And the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) provided “victims and opportunity to voice the horrors they witnessed and experienced” (www.icty.org/sid/3; last viewed 25 September, 2013), and to build new memories and a new narrative about restoration, justice, and citizenship (Jones, et al., 2013). Yet some leaders of youth-focused NGOs expressed concern that youth would not be ready to confront such memories (interview, 2 July 2013) or that you simply wanted to move on (interviews, 1, 2, and 4 July, 2013). Both concerns were reflected in the future-orientation of many NGOs and their programming for (and by) young people. There was not, however, unanimity on this point. Some organizations led by young people have initiated projects to ‘map’ geonocide, and it appears that young people are the primary organizers and marchers in the annual march on Sbrenicia.

Similarly in Lebanon, there are on-going debates within the organizations we talked with as to whether there should be a truth and reconciliation commission to deal with the aftermath of its civil war and the later assassination of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri.

The Future Perfect Citizen

Yet the future that organizations attempt to create is not a future that is simply ‘out there.’ They are keenly aware – they cannot avoid – recognition of the past and the present as it affects their work, their ability to engage young people, and the ability to instil – to sediment – new habits of citizenship. Here we want to suggest a term for the temporality that underpins this these efforts: the future perfect. The future perfect (in English, at least) has a precise meaning and syntax; it is a construction that allows us to speak of an event that is expected to happen in a way that views it as prior and completed. An example of the future perfect is: she will have served as a volunteer for three years when she graduates. It consists of three elements: the auxiliary verb ‘will’ or ‘shall’ to indicate the future tense, the auxiliary verb ‘have’, and the past participle of the main verb. Note that all three verb tenses – future, present, and past – are included in the future perfect. In this way, it encompasses the very
temporality of youth citizenship. And given the discussions of the ‘ideal citizen’ in curricula and pedagogies, there is something fitting that it is ‘perfect.’

There is a way that NGOs that do want to deal with the past express their goals in terms of the future: for example, ‘we need to recognize past injustice to create a more just world.’ Or by encouraging young people to propose solutions and to design projects that would address real problems in the community – often cause by conflict – that blocks future progress. We often saw this strategy with infrastructure projects, for example persuading local governments to improve a road so that people and goods could circulate for the benefit of everyone. Even more often, they were environmental projects, such as cleaning a stream or a polluted area that was shared by many groups. It is often relatively easy to garner funds and enthusiasm for such projects, they are often caused by conflict or have festered because of the inability to work together, and they are based on an expectation of a future that is linked, if not shared. But in undertaking these projects, we were told, young people learned how to live and work together, gained understanding of the ‘other’, and new bonds began to grow. And as more than one project director commented, they are the kind of projects that no one can object to, and so they provide a kind of cover for their broader political agendas of peace, reconciliation, and respect that would ultimately be needed in the future.

It was, in short, the future perfect. And they believed it would work because it helps young people feel they have a stake in the places and communities in which they now live, and for the future. Häkli and Kallio (2013) argue that a feeling of having a stake is a means of motivating young people to act as members of the polis, or political community, and we argue, to learn the habits of citizenship.

Uncertain Futures for the Habits of Citizenship

Despite what may be their hopes for the future, the abilities of NGOs to sediment new habits will not unproblematically yield citizens that quietly assume the mantle of active citizenship. A quick trip to Lebanon can highlight some of the concerns: youth unemployment remains high, there are fears that the pressures of the sudden influx of Syrian refugees (it is estimated that one-third of the people in the country are refugees from Syria and Palestine) will provide fertile ground for radicalization, and the sectarian scaffolding built into the institutions of government are making it impossible to pass legislation or elect a president. There is little sense that young people feel they have a stake in either the future or the present, and they seem to have little interest in the past, or at least have effectively submerged it.

Yet there are signs that at least some young people are at least disrupting the status quo and the normal flow of daily life, and so are attempting to loosen habits of sectarianism.
Flash mobs around Beirut (organized by the young people who participate in the CityAct NGO) block traffic, to symbolize the blockages created by sectarianism. Campaigns have been waged to highlight the effect of car bombs on young people and the kinds of futures they might imagine.

As Häkli and Kallio (2013) indicate, the key may be to understand how and when young people begin to feel a stake. Organizations and agents within them often provide the skills and resources for young people, but they also often seem to shy away from identifying the stakes that are involved, perhaps fearing this could rekindle conflicts. Indeed, in deeply divided societies, it is unlikely that the feeling of having a stake – or perhaps the same stake – will be shared. As such, the process of loosening sedimentations of habits is likely to be contentious. When activated, young people will perhaps loosen, perhaps strengthen those habits. There should be no expectation that the habits they learn and enact can be settled. The future may be worked toward, but the complex temporalities of youth citizenship seem unlikely to be perfect.

References


Staeheli, L, Marshall, D, Jeffrey, A, Nagel, C, and Hammett, D (2014) Producing citizens:


---

1 In many post-conflict settings, youth-oriented NGOs often employ their ‘graduates’ or young people. In our interviews, we encountered many young adults (under 35 years of age) who had been involved in youth citizenship organizations prior to being employed by one. This practice is so common that it seems that NGOs in some countries are significant employers of youth.

2 The New Oxford American Dictionary defines it as “a tense of verbs expressing expected completion in the future.”