

Youth Lead the Way on the Climate Emergency

Article by Joëlle Zask

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On Friday 20 September, thousands of children will once again take to the streets in the name of the planet – and this time they call for adults to strike with them. Philosopher Joëlle Zask considers how the conscience and clarity of the young climate protestors upturns notions of minority and majority in political society. She argues that in the face of the irresponsibility of the adults around them – from passive consumers to unscrupulous industrialists and unresponsive governments – children are the guardians of humanity's future.

*We are the voiceless future of humanity ... We will not
accept a life in fear and devastation.*

16 March 2019. While the *gilets jaunes*, rioters and damage on the Champs-Élysées dominated the headlines in France, 350 000 French young people demonstrated across the country, part of 1.5 million young people across the world – from Australia, India and Russia to Belgium, South Korea and Canada – participating in the Youth Strikes for Climate. There was some coverage on 15 and 16 March, but little in the days afterwards [1].

24 May 2019. Fast forward two months and up to 1.8 million young people were in the streets in over 125 countries, in protests timed to coincide with European Union voters going to the polls. The mobilisation and quality of these youth movements – which have been protesting, campaigning, organising sit-ins, planning action using social media and striking – is today's real good news story. What they want is not more money in their pockets or government resignations but political action, which they feel part of, in favour of vigorous and immediate regulation of activities whose consequences are making, or are going to make, the planet uninhabitable.

In the medical world, it is well known that the younger people are, the more conscious they are of the reality of death and their ability to face it. On the other hand, the older people get, the harder they find it to grasp and accept the idea of death, as if with the passing of years grows an underlying belief of immortality. Those who are marching for the climate, who have been striking one school day a week since autumn 2018 and protesting in the name of all human beings, a global citizenry that finds nowhere else to establish itself, are children and teenagers. Given the righteousness of their slogans and environmental conscience, the democratic relevance of their organisations, the clarity of their statements, and the sincerity of their commitment, minority and majority seem to have been completely reversed.

A minor, according to Kant's essay *Answering the Question: What is Enlightenment?*, is someone who lacks courage, who perhaps sees the conditions for freedom but does not have the moral strength to put them into practice; someone who, instead of taking action and facing up to the unpredictable and potentially negative reactions of others, limits them self to the role of follower or spectator. It is the lazy and cowardly, irresponsible being, who lives in a world where contact with reality is as limited as possible. Instead of acting, they are acted upon; instead of thinking, they are thought about; instead of speaking, they are spoken of. They also want to be part

of it. The minor is a collectivist. Instead of connecting with the world, they endorse and vanish into it. Their submission to this or that authority, including that of the greatest number of people, is certainly a sign of weakness of character or lack of initiative. It is also the source of psychological comfort, which Gustave Le Bon saw through the phenomenon of the crowd, and in which Tocqueville, through the phenomenon of “passion for equality”, saw a significant danger for liberal democracies. He also predicted that its power to distort democratic ideals would be considerably enhanced by the growth of industrial capitalism.

The “consumer”, who is not the end of increasing capital but rather the means, has proved him right. It is consumers who have made the fortune of unscrupulous developers and industrialists who add addictive substances to tobacco, put carcinogenic chemicals in babies’ nappies and bottles, pollute the rivers and the soil, and destroy the forests. It is these mass murderers who, despite the known health and environmental risks, do not hesitate, as young people put it, to “destroy the planet” and create a “world with no future”. The children and teenagers who are marching for the climate are not wrong. They understand that the idea of the citizen as a dissatisfied consumer – including when it comes to the political decisions he or she disagrees with – who is kept in a state of minority by his or her dependence and fear of standing out, must be replaced with one of an active and informed user who behaves as an enlightened citizen.

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The young people involved in Youth for climate in Belgium, Sustainabilityteens in Canada, Little Citizen for Climate in France, the global Fridays For Future movement, the students at hundreds of schools and colleges across the world who have been devoting one day a week to the struggle, which they justify because “to study for a future that will not exist, that does not make sense” – these are the majors of our time [1]. These young people are rewriting the rules for harnessing civic, ethical and political engagement. Their watchwords are climate justice, ecology, global solidarity, concern for future generations, radical reform of the system and climate and environmental emergency. They face reality and confront finiteness and death with no filter: “Ignorance isn’t bliss. It is death. It’s a crime against our future.”

To great surprise, it is children who make up the democratic public that the philosopher John Dewey called for. In his 1927 book *The Public and its Problems*, he argued that the passive public, in other words, a body of people who suffer from the interdependence of human activities, will transform into an active public, i.e. a body of people who help set the conditions of their own existence. This transformation, he said, far from being automatic or simple, requires theoretical and practical self-government. The public must “discover” itself, members must engage with one another, exchange opinions, investigate the causes of their suffering and then organise to pressure their representatives into strictly regulating the activities whose consequences they feel.

Young people are the most qualified and worthy public. Those who, due to their age, can neither vote nor hold elected office, are rediscovering the meaning of political life, while steering well away from victimisation, criminal compromise, automatic recourse to platitudinous waffle and a wait-and-see policy. Through social networks, schools, word-of-mouth, and those figures whose hero-worship by the media is totally at odds with the spirit of their movements, young people are coming together and identifying their common interests. Eschewing intermediaries of any sort, whether party, higher authority or media (whose discretion towards them has been shocking), they have managed to coordinate their public engagements and speeches on their own terms. The rhetorical power of their words lies not in their eloquence but in their clarity and sincerity.

What is also impressive is that, rather than confining their demands to their specific interests, young people are

using language that speaks to everyone. Little by little, they are pushing back the boundaries of class, nationality, status, race, and faith, not because they are imbued with generosity or goodness, but because they understand that these prevailing divisions are the very cause of our dwindling chances on Earth. They do not, therefore, need to appeal to some or other feeling of human solidarity that can transcend differences, nor to imagine a connection between all of us is possible. They are not naive. They not only know that the world is so divided that one part of the population can envisage, without batting an eyelid, the wiping out of billions of humans, but also that the desire to find a solution that would fight division by emphasising what we have in common would be counterproductive. Implicitly, they have replaced France's today shortened republican motto of "liberty, equality, fraternity or death" with the democratic motto of "liberty, equality, solidarity or death".

Just as impressive is the fact that they do not need common enemies around which to form a community. Indeed, they do not believe that such enemies exist. Contrary to prevailing trends, they do not believe that there is an insuperable conflict between bosses and workers, blacks and whites, rich and poor, men and women, parents and children. They know that these oppositions depend not on unstoppable ideological systems but on circumstances. Far from expressing universal social laws, they are the result of society's choices made consciously by people who really exist and it is important to identify them as such.

Because, due to their majority status, these people believe that there are fundamentally no fatalities. Neither climate sceptics nor catastrophists, they believe in joint action and its ability to transform the world. In this sense, their vision is melioristic, reformist and radical. Their goal is not to wipe the slate clean, since it seems that nature – which, as far as the conditions for human existence are concerned, is in crisis – will see to this. Rather, it is to eliminate what is destroying our world from within and to preserve future resources. For example, they do not say that the Paris Agreement is a sham, but that it is just the first step and we need to forge ahead. By saying that they want a future, they are also saying that they do not want their children to feel the same about their generation as they do towards their parents: "We are happy to be the driving force..." says Anastasia Martynenko from Kiev, "because when our children ask us what have you done for our future, we will have an answer."

Their behaviour towards governments is telling. Instead of calling for them to go, or inciting rioting or violence, they simply ask governments to act. They have no truck with the mythical personification of the ruling class, the rhetoric of "they're all corrupt" and burning effigies of the despised. While they look to politicians, it is not because they are obedient. Contrary to Kant's vision, they are not polarised between obedience of the rules as private individuals (they hold school strikes, for example) and the public use of their reason as citizens, a status that they do not, in any case, enjoy. While they engage with representative democracy, it is not because they are delegating their power to rulers but because they hope to use their power to force them, through the courts if necessary, to do their job, which is to represent the people, regulate activities whose consequences are profoundly harmful and work energetically towards the transition to a zero-carbon society. In doing so, they also hope to mobilise the various strata of followers, "guardians" (Kant) and actors who allow governments to exist as they do and who legitimise their climate inaction. Their targets of course include big polluters like Monsanto, RWE in Germany, and Adani in Australia, but also the jurisdictions that decriminalise them and the day-to-day actions of everyone which contribute to the general laissez-faire environment.

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In their capacity as majors, they have taken on a role in an essential phase of the politicisation of flouted interests, namely gathering data, facts, evidence that alternatives exist. Because they believe that intermediary layer between government and society – experts – is irrelevant. In their eyes, the intrusive system of institutionalised expertise encourages the dilution of accountability, the justification of unacceptable actions and self-exoneration. On the other hand, they believe in science – which they use as they hope to use public opinion – and in collective intelligence: “We need to start cooperating and sharing the remaining resources of this planet in a fair way,” explains Greta Thunberg. “We are just passing on the words of the science. Our only demand is that you start listening to it, and then start acting.”

Which is why, in their schools and towns, they are forming “eco teams” that are running tangible environmental projects (getting rid of drinks vending machines or encouraging cycling to school) and contributing to the global debate on how to leave behind coal power, nuclear energy, and industrial agriculture. Working with scientists, often aided by their teachers and, increasingly, their parents, they are looking for solutions to climate change – in industries ranging from construction to manufacturing, from waste management to fishing – and have a list of demands to keep up the pressure.

The system that led to childhood and adulthood effectively being reversed – by associating the latter with qualities and trends that have resulted in today’s environmental imbalances – reveals a pathological infantilism. Meanwhile, young people and, with them, all those said to be minors (women, indigenous peoples, the disabled, the dependent) who have been historically excluded from political society – because, for no good reason, they were deemed incapable of discerning the common good – are turning out to be the custodians of a new humanism and the guardians of the conditions for human existence. That piece of childhood which endures in the groups they form is not a handicap but a strength.

[1] Quote from Swiss environmental activist Jonas Kampus. About the youth climate movement in Belgium, see <<https://www.cahiers-pedagogiques.com/Depuis-que-nous-faisons-greve-les-jeudis-la-question-climatique-est-au-centre-du-debat>> .

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