



# Brands of youth citizenship and the politics of scale: National Citizen Service in the United Kingdom



Sarah Mills <sup>a, \*</sup>, Catherine Waite <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Geography, Loughborough University, Leicestershire, LE11 3TU, United Kingdom

<sup>b</sup> Department of Environmental and Geographical Sciences, The University of Northampton, Northampton, NN2 6JD, United Kingdom

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 9 August 2016

Received in revised form

12 November 2016

Accepted 14 November 2016

Available online 25 November 2016

### Keywords:

Youth

Citizenship

Scale

United Kingdom

Britishness

NCS

## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the politics of scale in the context of youth citizenship. We propose the concept of 'brands of youth citizenship' to understand recent shifts in the state promotion of citizenship formations for young people, and demonstrate how scale is crucial to that agenda. As such, we push forward debates on the scaling of citizenship more broadly through an examination of the imaginative and institutional geographies of learning to be a citizen. The paper's empirical focus is a state-funded youth programme in the UK – National Citizen Service – launched in 2011 and now reaching tens of thousands of 15–17 year olds. We demonstrate the 'branding' of youth citizenship, cast here in terms of social action and designed to create a particular type of citizen-subject. Original research with key architects, delivery providers and young people demonstrates two key points of interest. First, that the scales of youth citizenship embedded in NCS promote engagement at the local scale, as part of a national collective, whilst the global scale is curiously absent. Second, that discourses of youth citizenship are increasingly mobilised alongside ideas of Britishness yet fractured by the geographies of devolution. Overall, the paper explores the scalar politics and performance of youth citizenship, the tensions therein, and the wider implications of this study for both political geographers and society more broadly at a time of heated debate about youthful politics in the United Kingdom and beyond.

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## 1. Introduction

Citizenship is one of the most contested concepts across the social and political sciences, with a wealth of research examining its complex formations, expressions, politics and poetics (Heater, 2004; Ho, 2014; Isin, 2002; Yarwood, 2013). Political geographers have conceptualised and understood citizenship in different ways (for an excellent review see Staeheli, 2011) and key editorials have highlighted the analytical purchase of *scale* in such work (Desforges, Jones, & Woods, 2005; Painter & Philo, 1995). Indeed, as Marston and Mitchell state, "geographical scale is centrally implicated in producing and sustaining citizenship formations" (2004: 730; see also Mitchell, 2003). Scale has also been emphasised as a conceptual entry point by those working on the wider political geographies of children and young people (Hopkins & Alexander, 2010; Mills & Duckett, 2016; Skelton, 2010, 2013) and used as a

key concept in some studies on citizenship education (e.g. Wood, 2012a). And yet, crucial and provocative questions remain on the scaling of youth citizenship and the institutional geographies of 'learning to be a citizen' (Jeffrey & Staeheli, 2016; Mills, 2013) that this article attends to as part of a two-fold agenda.

First, how do scalar imaginations and institutional geographies of youth citizenship emerge, take shape and cement themselves as part of state projects? We are concerned with how citizenship is used as a rhetorical device and 'buzzword' to mobilise and manufacture particular engagements and (dis)connections at different spatial scales. This does not mean we believe in limiting the *location* of citizenship to sites and scales (see Staeheli, Marshall, & Maynard, 2016 on these debates), but rather we focus on the multiple scales (and interactions between scales) that shape these state dynamics of (youth) citizenship. Second, how are the nested scalar ideas that geographers are so familiar with (i.e. local, national, global) fractured and re-configured by the political geographies of the state in the context of youth citizenship? Our focus is to interrogate how such geographies are influenced by broader political ideologies, policies and processes.

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [S.Mills@lboro.ac.uk](mailto:S.Mills@lboro.ac.uk) (S. Mills), [catherine.waite@northampton.ac.uk](mailto:catherine.waite@northampton.ac.uk) (C. Waite).

In exploring these questions, and interrogating how the scaling of youth citizenship matters, this paper makes two key contributions to academic debates at the confluence of work on being/becoming citizens, being/becoming political, and being/becoming adults (Philo & Smith, 2003; Kallio & Häkli, 2011, 2015; Skelton, 2010, 2013; Staeheli, Attoh, & Mitchell, 2013; see also; Uprichard, 2008). First, the paper proposes the concept of 'brands' of youth citizenship to understand recent shifts in the state promotion of youth citizenship formations. We offer this term to capture attempts to formally build and mobilise youth citizenship in nation-states and make particular types of citizen-subject. In so doing, we offer a much needed focus on how different forms of P/political engagement at different scales are promoted to young people as part of wider state projects. This focus enriches work on the geographies of youth citizenship and citizenship education (Mills, 2013; Pykett, 2010; Staeheli & Hammett, 2010; Wood, 2012a) by emphasising the multiple actors that design a 'model' of youth citizenship and shape these scalar institutional geographies. Furthermore, we question the extent to which the organisational spaces associated with such projects are actually *about* citizenship (mirroring its wider definitional dilemmas) and expose how a certain 'brand' of youth citizenship is presently being used by the neoliberal state. Second, the paper importantly considers the often neglected processes of state-formation and governance – namely devolution – and diffuse ideologies with growing political currency – namely Britishness – that challenge such 'neat' scalar containers. This focus on devolution is an important contribution to work on young people's political geographies (Hopkins, 2015; Mills & Duckett, 2016), with a study that takes the United Kingdom as its focus, posing timely questions about the relationship between (youth) citizenship, national identity and belonging. We bring into sharp relief the uneven geographies of learning to be a citizen, revealing the multiple scalar fractures and fissures that crystallise in such projects, reflecting wider tensions and potential opportunities.

To explore the above questions and make these novel contributions, this paper uses the example of a large state-funded youth citizenship programme that is fundamentally re-shaping the landscape of youth work and youth policy in the United Kingdom. We draw on the case-study of National Citizen Service (NCS) – that describes itself as the fastest growing youth movement in the UK for a century – to demonstrate the scalar politics and performance of youth citizenship and tensions therein. NCS is a short-term state-funded voluntary youth scheme motivated by wider policy objectives and is at the centre of a push by the UK Government to foster 'generation citizen' (Birdwell & Bani, 2014). Despite a long history of youthful citizenship training by the state and civil society via spaces of formal and informal education (Mills, 2013), this landscape is undergoing significant transformations since the emergence of NCS in 2011. Active citizenship – the performative practices of responsible citizens – is ubiquitous with youth volunteering schemes. Yet this recent attempt by the UK Government to create and mould active citizens is operating at a time of increased pressure for young people to pursue the 'cult of experience' (Holdsworth, 2015) and boost CVs in precarious economic times. These dynamics are part of wider ideas about transitions to a 'successful' adulthood, differently imagined and experienced across the Global North and South in relation to employment or education (see for example Esson, 2013 on Ghana; Cheng, 2014 on Singapore).

The paper is structured in five remaining sections. First, we flesh out the conceptual ideas surrounding youth citizenship and related debates in the literature. Second, we provide an overview of National Citizen Service as a case-study and our research project methodology. We then present a detailed empirical discussion in two sections that map onto our two-fold agenda. The paper's

conclusion outlines the importance of this paper's contributions to knowledge in political geography and beyond.

## 2. Making (young) citizens: scale, P/politics and pedagogical spaces

The study of youth citizenship has been an important strand of the recent, vibrant growth of young people's political geographies (Benwell & Hopkins, 2016; Mills & Duckett, 2016; Philo & Smith, 2003; Skelton, 2010, 2013). Research in this field has examined the various spaces and strategies that construct young people as citizens (in the making), how children and young people experience rights and responsibilities in different geographical contexts, and how young people engage in everyday or alternative performances of citizenship (e.g. Mills, 2013; Pykett, 2010; Staeheli & Hammett, 2010; Wood, 2012b). Across the board, researchers working in this area have advocated the importance of age as a marker of social difference, as part of a wider intellectual project on children and young people's geographies. Children and young people lie at the heart of the wider philosophical idea that citizens can be 'made', and as such, they have collectively been seen as *in need of training* for well over a century by state actors and other institutions in civil society. It is not surprising then that most research on youth citizenship by political geographers has focused on educational sites and settings, with citizenship education examined as a pedagogical policy, process and political tool. Spaces of formal and informal education grapple with the dual positioning of children and young people as both future adult citizens and current 'active' citizens within a wider moral landscape of childhood (Mills, 2013) and in relation to wider nation-building processes (see, for example, Ferguson, 2003 on Zambia; Cheney, 2007 on Uganda; Jones, Merriman, & Mills, 2016 on Wales).

Studies on citizenship education have often emphasised spatiality and scale (Mitchell, 2003), for example exploring the construction of national and post-colonial formal educational curriculums (Pykett, 2010; Staeheli & Hammett, 2010; Wainaina, Arnot, & Chege, 2011), the nation-building projects of voluntary youth movements (Jones et al., 2016; Mills, 2013) or (inter)national NGO programmes and activities in post-conflict settings (Jeffrey & Staeheli, 2016; Nagel & Staeheli, 2016). Bronwyn Wood (2012a) makes a compelling case to consider the multiple scales of youth citizenship in her study of New Zealand's curriculum, and others such as Susie Weller (2003) have shown how a national curriculum may not account for teenager's own political 'acts' of citizenship at the local scale (see also Wood, 2012b on liminal politics). This work links to a key focus within the study of young people's political geographies on their experiences as political beings (not just becomings), couched in terms of the dualism between Politics, that is formal state processes and expressions; and politics, as everyday or personal politics (Flint, 2003; Philo & Smith, 2003; see also Kraftl, 2013 on going 'beyond politics').

We know that the local, national and global scale are not neat containers, but that scale is relational, socially constructed, and that multi-scalar geographies shape society, politics and everyday life (Herod, 2009; Marston, 2000; Newstead, Reid, & Sparke, 2003). Yet as the introduction to our paper outlined, scope remains to examine how scalar imaginations and institutional geographies (Philo & Parr, 2000) of youth citizenship emerge, take shape and cement themselves as part of state projects. This contributes to wider, long-standing debates in political geography on the state, citizenship and politics of scale (Desforges et al., 2005; Marston & Mitchell, 2004; Painter & Philo, 1995) and the scales of children and young people's everyday lives (Ansell, 2009; Hopkins, 2007; Hopkins & Alexander, 2010). In a recent intervention, Staeheli et al. (2016) call for a focus on the 'circulations' that constitute

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