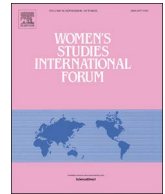


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'I'm a feminist, I'm not ashamed and I'm proud': Young people's activism and feminist identities in Estonia, Spain and the UK



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A B S T R A C T

This paper explores the upsurge in young people's activism across Europe by drawing on three ethnographic studies of feminist and LGBT activism. The studies include a feminist organisation, UK Feminista, in a stable liberal democracy, the *Feministes Indignades* in post-fascist Spain, and the LGBT movement in post-communist Estonia. The paper argues that feminist identities, both individual and collective, are critical to the feminist and LGBT movements studied; that affect, both positive and negative, contributes to processes of mobilisation and identity formation; and that, while social media are an important element of repertoires of action in all three cases, the forms of action engaged in draw on a range of cultural resources, many of which derive from earlier cycles of protest. It pays particular attention to the 'coming out' stories of activists, the transformation of fear and shame into anger and pride which is central both to transforming individual identities and creating collective identities, and how these processes differ in the three case studies.

In recent years there has been an upsurge in young people's activism across Europe in opposition to the cultural and economic practices associated with neoliberalism and, particularly, austerity. This ranges from Occupy and the 15M Movement¹ to the mobilisation of young people in support of Jeremy Corbyn in the June 2017 general election in the UK. Upsurges in activism are often understood in terms of waves or cycles of protest² which refer to periods of intense social movement activity interspersed by periods when movements go into 'abeyance' and activities continue but in less spectacular, more institutionally-based forms (Bagguley, 2002; Mann & Hoffman, 2005; Tarrow, 1994). Within feminism the wave metaphor is contentious and has been critiqued for both overlooking the varying temporality of feminist movements in different parts of the world and being ethnocentric (Mackay, 2011; Woodhull, 2003). Furthermore, it is often associated with divisions between waves rather than a recognition of their convergence and the 'underlying continuity' characterising feminist movements (Evans & Chamberlain, 2015). Third wave feminism is particularly problematic. The term was coined in the US by black feminists to distinguish their

own feminism from both post-feminism and second wave feminism (Springer, 2002) but has been used in many different ways since then (Dean, 2010; Evans, 2015, 2016). Moreover, while the wave metaphor might be helpful in understanding the temporality of US and, to a lesser extent, UK feminisms (see for e.g. Aune & Holyoak, 2017; Charles & Wadia, 2017; Evans, 2016; Redfern & Aune, 2010), it is not necessarily helpful in understanding feminist movements elsewhere, particularly in post-communist and post-fascist societies (Dean & Aune, 2015), where the history of feminist movements has been different from that in the US or the UK (Graff, 2003).

In what follows we do not engage with debates about whether the current upsurge of feminist activism can be understood as third or fourth wave, our focus instead is on the repertoires of action engaged in by contemporary feminist and LGBT movements, and the part played by social media and affect in both mobilisation and collective identity formation. The argument we develop is that feminist identities, both individual and collective, are critical to the feminist and LGBT movements we studied; that affect, both positive and negative, contributes to

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¹ The 15M movement refers to mass protests and occupations of public space which occurred in over 70 Spanish towns and cities in 2011–2012, in the wake of the economic crisis of 2008 (Calvo, 2013).

² According to Tarrow, a cycle of protest may be seen as 'an increasing and then decreasing wave of inter-related collective actions and reactions to them whose aggregate frequency, intensity, and forms increase and then decline in rough chronological proximity' (Tarrow, 1993: 287).

processes of mobilisation and identity formation; and that repertoires of action draw on a range of cultural resources, many of which derive from earlier cycles of activism. In order to develop this argument, we look first at how activism has been theorised, focusing on the role of social media and affect/emotion in mobilisation and collective identity formation. We then describe the ethnographic studies of young people's activism on which this paper draws before discussing the repertoires of action characterising the movements, the way affect operates as both a vehicle of action and an element of collective identity formation, and the importance of a collective feminist identity for these forms of activism.

Understanding activism

Social movement theorists argue that the current upsurge in activism is distinguished from previous social movements by the availability of the Internet and social media which, as well as creating spontaneity and obviating the need for leadership and organisation (Castells, 2012), create new forms of action (Funke & Wolfson, 2014). This view is promulgated by the news media which, according to Gerbaudo, approach 'the emergence of any new movement in terms of the technology defining it' (Gerbaudo, 2012: 6). In the UK, for instance, journalists characterise the current upsurge of feminist activism as a fourth wave distinguishable from its predecessors by its basis in digital culture (Cochrane, 2013), a view that has been taken up by academic commentators (Chamberlain, 2017; Knappe & Lang, 2014; Munro, 2013). While it may be the case that new communication technologies are associated with new repertoires of action they are also a powerful resource both for facilitating forms of action which have been evident in previous cycles of protest and for mobilising young people. Indeed, the exploitation of new technologies appears more 'natural' to generations of young activists whose protests and grievances in the 2000s have been directed against older generations of power elites. However, while social media may be an important means of social movement mobilisation, mobilisation cannot be 'reduced to the material affordances of the technologies it adopts' (Gerbaudo, 2012: 9). Importantly it 'also involves the construction of shared meanings, identities and narratives' (Gerbaudo, 2012: 9) in which emotions and affect are central.

The importance of emotions to mobilisation has long been recognised, with early resource mobilisation theory suggesting that social movement organisations highlighted certain injustices and inequalities to potential participants in order to raise righteous anger (Fireman & Gamson, 1979) or to allow would-be activists the possibility of finding justifications for feelings of anger, guilt and shame already experienced (Scher & Heise, 1992). More recently attention has been paid to the way affect and emotions are involved in both social movement mobilisation and the formation of collective identities (Flam & King, 2005). It has been argued that social movements allow would-be activists to discover that stigmatised identities (feminist, gay, lesbian, trans) are not in themselves 'deviant' or associated with negative affect but are constructed in this way by society. By claiming these identities, individuals are able to replace feelings of guilt, fear or shame with anger and eventually pride (Britt & Heise, 2000; Castells, 2012; Kleres, 2005; Whittier, 2012). Acting collectively within a social movement allows them to express anger and to channel damaging emotions outwards, holding society or unjust socio-economic, political and cultural systems responsible for defining specific attributes negatively. Activist anger constitutes important emotional capital and becomes part of the resources used by social movements for collective mobilisation.

In addition to constituting an important vehicle of action, emotions are central to the formation of collective identities. Collective identities can be defined as 'the shared identification of a group that derives from members' common interests, experiences, and solidarity' (Taylor & Whittier, 1995: 172) and are a product of the symbolic 'meaning work' undertaken by social movements (Snow & Benford, 1992). They provide a link between individuals and social structures and help us

understand 'the means by which structural inequality becomes subjectively experienced discontent' (Taylor & Whittier, 1995: 171–172). Constructing a collective identity is crucial for both 'recruiting participants' (Polletta & Jasper, 2001: 291) and building a social movement (Della Porta, Andretta, Mosco, & Reiter, 2006) and is achieved through continual re/negotiation within social movement networks (Rupp & Taylor, 1999). These networks, both on and offline, provide important spaces for the creation of 'moral and emotional connection' (Polletta & Jasper, 2001: 285; Taylor & Whittier, 1995).

Such connection relies on 'reciprocal' emotions which bring social movement participants together (Rupp & Taylor, 1999) and 'shared' emotions which are directed outwards (Pilkington, 2016: 179). Both types of emotion lead to individuals identifying with and feeling connected to others, a process facilitated by social media (Gerbaudo, 2012). This feeling of connection and a shared identity enables individuals to develop positive feelings about themselves (Whittier, 2012). Moreover, being part of a social movement where common attributes, values and a vision for society are shared enhances communication, solidarity and feelings of belonging. As well as fostering inclusion, however, collective identities can also exclude. This can be countered by a commitment to intersectionality which enables the creation of a collective identity with 'deliberately permeable boundaries' (Whittier, 2012: 154).

Clearly affect, both negative and positive, is crucial to how we understand social movements; it constitutes an important element of their rituals and performances (Taylor & Whittier, 1995) and is both a resource for mobilisation and an important aspect of collective identity formation (Melucci, 1995). In what follows, we explore the rituals and performances characterising our three social movements, how affect operates as both a vehicle of action and element of collective identity, and the significance of feminist collective identities for young people's feminist and LGBT activism. First, however, we describe the research on which this paper is based.

Feminist and LGBT activism in three countries

The ethnographic case studies of feminist and LGBT activism were conducted in the UK, Spain and Estonia, countries which belong to the EU but have contrasting histories and political legacies.³ The UK has a long history of liberal democracy, homosexuality was decriminalised in 1967 and there was an active women's liberation movement in the 1960s and 1970s (Charles, 2000). There is legal protection from discrimination on grounds of gender and sexuality, and (with the exception of Northern Ireland) abortion and same-sex marriage are legal. Spain experienced a long period of fascist dictatorship under Franco which only ended in 1975. In the last years of Franco's rule autonomous feminist groups and organisations were in evidence and, three years after Franco's death, feminists were demanding the inclusion of women's rights in the new constitution (Kaplan, 1992: 198, 201). Homosexuality was decriminalised in 1995 and there is now legislation for equal pay, protection from discrimination on the basis of gender or sexuality, and abortion and same-sex marriage are legal. Estonia emerged from Soviet control in 1991. Like other countries in the Soviet bloc, 'it skipped the radical 1960s' which, in the West 'covered a lot of ground in terms of women's rights and gender roles' (Graff, 2003: 108). Since the incorporation of EU law in 2004, it has laws on equal pay, sex discrimination is outlawed and abortion laws have been liberalised. In 2016 gay partnerships were recognised but, although homosexuality was legalised in 1992, homophobic attitudes are widespread (ERR.EE

³ The studies were part of a larger, EU-funded project, MYPLACE (Memory, Youth, Political Legacy and Civic Engagement), which explored the civic and political engagement of young people across Europe in societies differentially affected by totalitarianisms of the left and right. Countries included 'contrasting social and political heritages from communist to fascist as well as countries with no such experience' (Pilkington & Pollock, 2015: 21).

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