Part VI

Society
14. Individuals and families
14.6

Impacts of individualism on world-system transformation

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Thinking of an impending world-system transformation can be both daunting and exciting—as yet the new world-system holds the power of the unknown over us. We find ourselves debating how factors such as economics, creation of knowledge, culture, values, wealth, and power will influence the transformation to shape a new world-system. Change can be considered both in terms of structural change as well as changes in the behavior of individual agents. In this short essay I address the latter, asking: what are the generational traits of the individuals that will be creating and experiencing systemic change? And does this provide any indication of how a new world-system might emerge?

Contemporary youth in a number of current “core” countries (herein “youth”) are researched to participate in electoral politics at a lower rate than their adult counterparts (Dalton 2008; Putnam 2000; Zukin et al 2006). Youth’s voting rate is not only lower than adults’ but often decreases with each election; youth are less likely to join political parties than their parents were at a young age; and youth are becoming more critical of how democracy operates in contemporary society. Youth’s declining engagement in electoral politics can been explained by the simultaneous rise of new politics which prioritises self-actualization, aesthetic needs, global responsibility, and full-scale democratization over classic political issues such as the redistribution of wealth (Zukin et al 2006). New politics have emerged because youth respond to the fragmented and unstable structures of late modernity by constantly managing individualized projects of risk assessment and self-actualization.

Youth are able to manage individualized projects of risk assessment and self-actualization because of the technological advances which have led to the emergence of the network society (Castells 2000). In the contemporary network society, communication has been liberalized by the rise of mobile phones and the Internet (Wellman 2002). Individuals have more choice and agency regarding with whom they communicate and subsequently which values, ideals, and interests they absorb. Time and space are virtually insignificant (Castells 2000). As a consequence of this hypered agency and individualism, youth’s political and social identities are qualitatively different to those of preceding generations. Youth understand change and governance in individualistic terms, just as they understand the process of decision-making and empowerment in individualistic terms.

Youth’s exploration of new modes of empowerment and political engagement sees them retreating from the idea that the nation-state is the dominant unit of social organization. This is interesting, because individuals that are most involved in exploring new modes of political engagement are likely to pioneer a new world-system. In line with Boswell’s thoughts, “it is
exactly during the formation of a new world order that revolutions and social movements from below can have the greatest influence on the shape of the world system” (Boswell 2002). Although a new world-system will be defined by new dynamics and currencies, I suggest that agents that have greater access to information and knowledge-creation in the current world-system are likely to have a greater influence on how a new world-system emerges.

There are risks, however, associated with a new world-system emerging out of youth’s current individualistic behavior and retreat from electoral politics. One risk may be that retreating from electoral politics may not necessarily diminish the power of the state—it would merely diminish its democratic integrity. Without citizens’ political engagement and review, parliaments may choose to abandon a multitude of social support functions including health, housing, and income support whilst increasing protectionist mechanisms such as border security. While youth may engage in the issues they feel passionate about by joining virtual communities and movements, their physical surroundings may remain heavily governed by state policies.

A second consideration should be how access to knowledge-creation and dissemination will affect one’s influence over the emergence of a new world-system. Access to knowledge and information is seminal in evaluating one’s level of agency and to some degree, power. In the current system, trading patterns are what determine power relations—who exists in the core, and who in the periphery. Advocates of the knowledge economy may argue that the trading of knowledge, data, and ideas through virtual communities will have an impact on currencies in the new world-system. A system hegemon, however masked, is certainly possible within a knowledge economy. However, perhaps the diversity and fragmentation of society that arises from late modernity’s uncertainties will pose a barrier to the hegemon having unconditional influence.

References