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Being a Socialist in Manchester (A Manchester Case)

Alexandre Pais

Abstract

This chapter sets out the political participation of a group of young socialists in Manchester. The analysis indicates that the young socialists' participation was driven by a critique of the structural conditions of capi-talism. The young people in this group deliberately eschewed discussions of individual stories in their group's activism, or in recounting what brought them to the group. In doing so, they reject the place of individual needs and stories (framed here as an element of 'identity politics') in bringing about the societal change they believe is necessary. This is not to say that they deny the place or role of identity politics but, rather, that they want to supplement achieving change in individual categories of oppression by creating the economic (i.e. non-capitalist) conditions where all oppressions are eliminated. The young socialists' participation in terms of their group sessions was quite formal in nature (lecture, discussion, etc.) and was concerned with education and theoretical debate, replicating practices from the socialist movement. Drawing on contemporary theory the chapter argues that the socialist students compare greatly to other young people who may be cast as 'radically unpolitical' because of the socialists' sober adherence to an old ideology.

Keywords: Young socialists; socialism; capitalism; identity politics; ideology; social movements

Introduction

In her book about the lives of young people in Britain, Georgia Gould, herself a young person and an active member of the British Labour Party, suggests that

‘many young people no longer express their political beliefs in collective movements but in highly personal choices about how they live, where they work and consume’ (Gould, 2015, p. 4). This move is perceived by the author as an emancipatory one, which ‘should be celebrated and encouraged as the starting point of a new empowered citizenship’ (p. 4). The shift from collective endeavours towards choice and individual responsibility are the main characteristics of the post-1970 generation (Farthing, 2010; Furlong & Cartmel, 2007; Wyn & Woodman, 2006). In this new citizenship, people no longer rely on a strong state to delineate their participation but are instead encouraged to individually pursue their own interests, independently and free from a broader collective commitment. This change is concomitant with the decline of the welfare state and public provision, and with the emergence of voluntary and private services (in education, health, and youth provision). In the field of youth, this restructuring of the welfare state has both provoked a disillusionment and powerlessness of those working in the field of youth work, but also provided a framework for groups to develop their activities within a logic of self-enhancement and entrepreneurship (Batsleer & Humphries, 2000; Farthing, 2010; Raby, 2014; Walsh et al., 2018).

This move from collective engagement towards individualised choices illustrates a broader change in cultural studies and social sciences (e.g. Bauman, 2001; Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991); and is concomitant with the emergence of *identity politics* as the privileged mode of contemporary politics.¹ Identity politics is the form of politics that matches the decline of the welfare state as well as the progressive abandonment of theories that attempt to grasp society in its totality – what Lyotard (1984) famously called the ‘metanarratives of the past’. Instead of the metanarratives that dominated scientific and political discourse in the past, identity politics comprises a multiplicity of accounts concerning particular social groups and their political agenda. It is a political approach wherein people of a particular gender, religion, race, social background, class, or other identifying factors, develop intragroup political agenda against forms of oppression and exploitation. Within this new political cosmos, emphasis is given to the identity of a particular group as well as to its locality, while universal struggles and collective arrangements are often seen as alienating and castrating of individual freedoms and agencies (Seidman, 1994a).

Elsewhere the current author explores how young people are experiencing this decline in universal values, by critically engaging with research literature addressing the objective and subjective conditions of youth participation (Pais, 2022). In this chapter, while also addressing how young people experience this change in politics, I explore the work that I developed over two years with members of a youth organisation based in Manchester – the Socialist Students. This is an interesting group of young people because, although their participation has all the characteristics of a ‘formal’ space, in the way it is regulated by specific rules and roles, follows predetermined agenda, and intervenes in everyday politics, their activity is not a form of ‘identity politics’, but is instead reminiscent of a communist pathos that emphasises collectivist work ethics, the positing of capital as a totality, and a discourse of revolutionary politics. In so doing, they go against the

grain of contemporary political thought, with all the challenges and misfortunes that such a position of struggle encompasses.

In what follows, I start by explaining what is meant by identity politics within the context of what is usually called the postmodern condition. I then present the group and explain instances of its *modus operandi* that stand out as crucial elements of the group's identity *vis-à-vis* its political participation. I finish the article by elaborating on the place that politics occupies within the lives of young people, and the overall debate concerning the tension between a political approach based on the emancipation of different identity groups, and an approach that, although recognising the importance of struggles, emphasises the need to consider the capitalist mode of production. This will be done by referring to relevant literature in the field of youth studies, together with elements from contemporary theory.

Setting the Background: Identity Politics

In a 2018 newspaper article,² Shaun Walker, a UK-based journalist who had been living in Russia for the last 15 years, describes an uncanny encounter he had with a member of the Russian political apparatus of the Putin era. He reports being welcomed into an office covered from floor to ceiling with Orthodox religious icons. Surprised by the décor that seemed to contradict the communist identity of the host, he promptly inquired about the oddity of this situation. The answer he received was truly astonishing: 'Oh, I'm not at all religious', he told Shaun with a laugh, 'I just like to change my ideological surroundings every few weeks for inspiration'. This anecdote captures the change in politics that has been occurring in the last decades.³ While in universal politics the individual is perceived as being subordinated to a particular ideal, in identity politics, individuals have instead the power to decide which ideals they support. Ideological commitment to a bigger cause is perceived as something alienating and castrating. Instead, subjects are free to choose both their ideologies and their identities. Plurality and free choice are emblematic features of identity politics.

The incredulity towards what Lyotard (1984) called *metanarratives*, together with the *hybridisation* of traditionally fixed and compartmentalised areas of knowledge, the recognition of the strict interlinkage between science and politics, and a denaturalisation of the notion of truth are the main features of the so-called *postmodern condition*. The question posed by Lyotard – do we still live in modernity? – created a discussion that remains actual, and different suggestions have been given to characterise our current society. Conceptualisations such as Ulrich Beck's *risk society*, Anthony Giddens' *late modernity*, Zygmunt Bauman's *liquid society* or Manuel Castells' *informational society* try to reinforce or oppose the idea that we live in a postmodern époque. Whether we have surpassed the modern, and have already inaugurated a 'new era', or we are just living a radicalisation of modernity, what seems to be common to all these conceptualisations is the shared assumption that there are core features of today's society that cannot be fully explained with modern theories, especially the 'meta-theories' of the past. Postmodern theorists turn up their noses at concepts such as 'universality'

or ‘totality’. Instead, they emphasise the existence of multiple realities, each one with their own universality. In the words of Seidman (1994a, p. 5), the shift from metanarratives to local narratives, and from general theories to pragmatic strategies suggests ‘that in place of assuming a universal mind or a rational knowing subject, we imagine multiple minds, subjects, and knowledges reflecting different social locations and histories’. Identity politics is the form of politics that matches such an epistemology. This form of politics is correlative to the abandonment of the analysis of capitalism as a global economic system, privileging instead the politics of different identities (sexual, racial, ethnic, class, etc.), and a plurality of struggles (Brown, 2017; Fukuyama, 1992; Žižek, 1997).

Postmodern theories had the merit of showing how history does not stand for ‘what really happened’; rather, history is a meticulous process of storytelling, where the emergence of new knowledge is always mediated by the correlative power relations involved in the proclamation of some statement as ‘true’ (e.g. Foucault, 2008). Postmodern theorisations addressed the radical contingency of historical processes, thus contributing to the deconstruction of the modern claims of universality and truth and asserting ‘the value of individuality, difference, heterogeneity, locality, and pluralism’ (Seidman, 1994a, p. 7). However, notwithstanding the importance of postmodern theorisations in deconstructing categories and systems of oppression, this was done to the detriment of political economy as a global system of exploitation.

Although this debate was never settled and has been the place of heated theoretical and political discussions (e.g. Butler et al., 2000; Cole, 2003; Vighi & Feldner, 2007), the last decade has shown a re-emergence of universal politics against the background of the 2008 economic crisis that contributed to bringing again the issue of economy to the foreground (e.g. Piketty, 2014; Varoufakis, 2011). There seems to be an awareness that global capital (and the notion of universality that accompanies it) cannot be excluded from the postmodern analysis of language and culture that characterises identity politics. While in 2000 one could still affirm, with Laclau (Butler et al., 2000), that class struggle, as one of the species of identity politics, ‘is becoming less and less important in the world in which we live’ (p. 203), today, almost two decades later, class and economy again appear as an incontrovertible element for social and cultural analysis.

The Socialist Party and the Socialist Students: Overview and Focal Issues

Adam was 14 years old when the 2008 financial crisis hit the global economy. He was living with his parents and younger brother in England. Despite his young age, Adam was deeply affected by what he was seeing in the news and started questioning himself about how such events can happen. This was also the moment when he and his family started to have broadband internet in their house, which prompted him to search for information about the world’s economic system. He started ‘interrogating himself about stuff that we take for granted in our capitalist world’,⁴ and to read not only news materials, but also historical works about communist and socialist movements. This literature allowed him to

make sense of the economic crisis not as a contingent occurrence of an otherwise good system, but as symptomatic of a political economy based on exploitation. This provoked in Adam a kind of disenchantment with the world. Instead of resignation, however, he started to look for likeminded people and organisations where he could share his ideas, learn more about politics, and participate in what was becoming a central part of his life – the struggle for an alternative economy.

Most of his friends at this age were from school, and from conservative/Tory areas usually associated with a right-wing electorate. He did not find among his peers of the time the kind of political understandings that were starting to unfold in his mind. He joined the Labour party when he was 16, but he soon became discontent. It felt to him that the members and supporters of the party, notwithstanding their opposition to conservative policies, were not willing to question the same capitalist system within which the Labour Party also operates. Although recognising the damaging nature of right-wing policies, Labour still did not conceive an alternative to capitalism. It pointed out its shortcomings and its malfunctions, but the overall spirit was that these could be solved through an amelioration of the system (different tax policies, more emphasis on workers' rights, etc.). From his readings and understandings, it became increasingly clear to Adam that broader, more radical, and more encompassing change had to occur, one that does not only concern people's mentalities, or palliative measures to alleviate the damages. The Labour party was not willing to go this far.

At age 18, Adam came to Manchester to study History at one of Manchester's universities: 'I already knew I wanted to join some sort of organisation, even if it was just the Student Union'. He signals as a turning point in his life his decision to join the Socialist Students, where he finally found a group of people with whom he could discuss political issues and engage in activism. At the first meeting, he immediately felt this was the group he wanted to be part of. What started as a need to be with likeminded people, ended up in a committed engagement with the Socialist Party.

The Socialist Students and the Manchester branch of the Socialist Party overlap both in terms of the composition of the group and the kind of activities with which they engage. Historically, the Socialist Party adopted its current name in 1997, following an exit from the Labour Party in 1991, and the change of name of Militant Labour to Socialist Party. Currently the party has members in executive positions in several trade unions and is a member of the Committee for a Workers' International and the European Anti-Capitalist Left. It assumes itself as a Trotskyist political party in England and Wales, with branches in localities where it has members. The case study we worked with during the PARTISPACE project concerns the Manchester branch of the party, where most of the members are young people, due partly to the high student population of the city (the Salford branch, for instance, has a higher proportion of adults).

The Socialist Students are the student wing of the Socialist Party, and its activities are developed within the Students' Unions of Manchester's universities. The group meets every week to discuss contemporary political issues and historical events, against the background of Marxian theory. There is a strong emphasis on deepening a common understanding and knowledge on issues such as the refugee

crisis, the American elections, Brexit, the Prevent Agenda, the National Student Survey, the Greek crisis, etc. The group is also engaged in political activism, by organising and participating in public protests and events (e.g. against austerity and against sexual harassment), as well as supporting working-class initiatives (e.g. the strikes in the NHS).

We first started our ethnographic case study with the Socialist Students, and then became engaged in the meetings of the Socialist Party. The Socialist Students is a group open to all students from two of Manchester's universities. To participate in the activities of the Socialist Party, on the other hand, you are expected to be a member of the party or are planning to become a member soon. The activities developed by both groups are similar. A significant part of their activities is structured around weekly meetings of 1.5 hours each. The Socialist Students' meetings take place in the facilities of both University of Manchester and Manchester Metropolitan University's Student Unions. The meetings of the Socialist Party take place at a pub, the Briton's Protection, one of the oldest in Manchester, with a history connected with the working-class population of the city. In both meetings, the numbers who come vary but usually, there are around eight to 10 people in each meeting. There is an overlap between the people who participate in the two meetings – about five adults come to the Socialist Party meetings that do not go to the Socialist Student meetings. Most of the people who participate in the meetings of the Socialist Party are young, and the leading roles (chair, treasurer, etc.) are all performed by young people.

The meetings of both groups consist of two parts. The first part is occupied with a short lecture (approximately 15 minutes) given by one of the participants around a certain topic, followed by discussion. In the second part, more administrative issues are discussed, and an agenda for the following week is presented, which usually includes participation in demonstrations, partnerships with other organisations, participation in conferences, and various forms of activism within the city of Manchester. Both meetings follow a very formal approach to the discussion. One member is responsible for preparing and giving an initial lecture on the topic of the day. The lectures are usually very well written and show a considerable engagement from the lecturer to prepare and inform her or himself about the topic. The lecture is followed by a discussion, where everybody participates. There is always someone chairing the session, making sure that everyone speaks in the right order (there is a great amount of concern not to overlap people's voices). In the meetings of the Socialist Party, there is a stronger emphasis on dealing with issues concerning the normal running of the party (e.g. participation in elections, organisations of weekend stalls, fundraising and participation in strikes). In the Socialist Students, the topics addressed are broader, and not necessarily discussed within Marxian theory. Participants of this group are also less sure about their political belongings, with some experimenting and seeking meaningful frames to make sense of the world and of themselves.

In what follows I will focus on a set of issues that emerged from our analysis, and which are important to consider within the background of youth participation, and the broader discussion on identity and universal politics.

'It Is Important to Educate People on the Revolutionary Ideas That You Don't Hear About'

One of the features that stands out is how both groups articulate activism with great theoretical awareness. All the discussions are heavily debated. The participants are politicised and theoretically informed. The meetings, both Socialist Students and the Socialist Party, are considered by its members to be educational spaces, where they can learn and discuss theories and positions that are often absent from formal education. Adam points out how the Socialist Students provided him with an alternative learning space, different from the university one. He said of his first engagement with the group:

I felt it was a second education for me. You have one side of the learning at university, and then you are learning all these other things, and I think it is important to educate people on these ideas, the revolutionary ideas that you don't hear about.

He mentions the space as an opportunity to share challenging ideas in an accessible way. It is also a challenging space, however, where young people are confronted with different ideas and must develop robust understandings and argumentations.

The emphasis on theoretical discussion may, however, be an obstacle to students' participation. As mentioned by Valentina, the chairwoman of the Socialist Party, 'a lot of the time people think they already have to know a lot to come and take part in the discussions'. The members of the group struggle to change this misconception, by trying 'to be as broad as possible', and by ensuring that everyone has the right to express their opinions and that everybody understands the issues being discussed: 'you can come along as long as you have an interest, and just want to learn more'. Interestingly, Valentina also mentions that the new generation is more willing to endorse socialist ideas: 'this generation is growing up after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the end of the Soviet Union, so Socialism isn't seen as such a dozy word anymore'.

'Squashing All That Energy'

It is easy to find the group's overall aim – a change in the capitalist mode of production – unrealistic. According to Adam, there is the 'idea that you cannot change the structures of society', and when presenting some of their ideas into adult spaces, these young people are often portrayed as naïve and idealistic. When some members of the group tried to participate in the Labour Party's activities, they were confronted with a kind of paternalism: 'you are new, you shouldn't have a say' (Adam). Adam went on to say: 'in the Labour [Party] there is a tension between new people coming in with momentum' and older people who want to retain their status quo ('sort of the old trade union and people on the branches'). 'Squashing all that energy' was an expression used by one of the members to express what she felt when, after Corbyn's leadership victory, she and other young

people joined one of the meetings of the party and were confronted with a very stiff form of organisation that did not allow space for new ideas, particularly ideas coming from young people. It was as if all the enthusiasm of young people in supporting Corbyn and the prospect of a radical change, was squashed by the structures of the (Labour) party. They felt there was no space for them. Although they came with strong intentions to change, this impetus was barred by the 'establishment'. For instance, they were asked to do 'phone banking', when what they wanted to do was something more relevant and meaningful.

Looking for Alliances in Common Struggles

Despite their position on the (far) left of the political spectrum, this group actively engages with other groups and other campaigns that are struggling against austerity politics, sexism, racism, anti-immigration movements among others. Every week they participate in protests, stalls and other manifestations, in association with other groups also working in the city of Manchester: the campaign against homelessness, the participation in different strikes organised by workers' trade unions, campaigning with groups working with refugees and asylum seekers. This willingness to work together with other groups of society, even if there are core disagreements concerning basic political positions, is considered important for the dynamics of the group. This might contrast with a certain idea of closure and orthodoxy that often characterises the public image of communist or socialist parties. However, in the words of Adam, 'it will be pointless working only with people that agree with you, because you don't reach out to everyone'. He criticises the idea of 'safe-spaces', as being too much focused on 'looking inwards', 'when in fact you have to look at the rest of the society' and 'try to get people involved in your ideas and [to] get your ideas out to people that disagree with you'. There is however a concern in ensuring that the main principles of the group are not diluted or compromised. The group is strongly rooted on the prospect that something must radically change at the level of political economy for other struggles (against race, against sexism, etc.) to be successful.

The Reclaim The Night Protest

One of the debates occurring in the group, for example, concerned the relationship between feminism and political economy – a recurring discussion within identity politics.⁵ The group shows a high level of awareness of the different positions concerning women's struggles, and there is an attempt to conceptualise feminism against the background of Marxian theory. There is also an awareness in the group about the importance of not creating ideological divisions between different struggles. One unfortunate feature of the discussion around identity politics concerns the positing of a division between struggles. For many Marxists, feminism, and the struggle against patriarchy, misogyny and sexual abuse can only be understood and overcome by addressing the exploitative nature of

capitalism. For many feminists, on the other hand, Marxian theory represents an old-fashioned refuge of male dominance, and new strategies need to be developed that go beyond changing an economic system (see, for instance, the debate between Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek, 2000). In the meetings of the group, these issues were dealt with care, and within an atmosphere of alliance. As mentioned by one of the participants, 'divide and conquer is an old strategy, very suitable for the purposes of capitalism'. Identity politics, while allowing for the emancipation of historically oppressed people – in terms of sex, gender, race, ethnicity, etc. – also creates a division, making it more difficult to conceptualise what a common struggle might be (Brown, 2017; Ghodsee, 2019; Zupančič, 2017).

The discussion about feminism took place in one of the meetings of the Socialist Students that coincided with the day of the Reclaim the Night campaign⁶ (2015). Before hitting the streets, the group gathered in their usual venue, and one of the participants (a student from the University of Manchester) gave a lecture about the history of the movement. Questions such as 'Should men be involved in the protest?' or 'Shall I vote on Hillary Clinton just because she is a woman?' were raised and discussed. The common position in the group was that 'it is not the individual that matters, but what they stand for' (from the fieldnotes).

After the meeting, we joined the protest. It has become a highly organised trademark. There is a team of people organising the event and making sure there are two different groups: one only with women, and another mixed. The group of women goes first. In conversations with members of the Socialist Students, I was told that this is to highlight that this is a women's struggle, and they alone should take the front. The members of the group I spoke with were not very comfortable with this decision to divide the protest into two groups. According to them, sexism is a problem that includes both women and men and should be dealt with in solidarity; it is not a fight of women against men, but a fight against sexism and for equality. There is an understanding in the group that sexism is an ideological position rather than one defined by your biology. Also, the young people felt uncomfortable with commercialisation of events like Reclaim the Night, which has been targeted by business companies that see it as a lucrative way to advertise their products. This is already happening with the Manchester gay parade, which is currently sponsored by Nando's, as noted by Valentina.

Youth Participation and Contemporary Politics

The analysis of the previous episodes offers us elements to address the initial discussion on the division between identity and universal politics. I will finish this chapter by elaborating on the place that politics occupies within the lives of these young people, and the overall debate concerning the tension between a political approach based on the emancipation of different identity groups, and an approach that, although recognising the importance of struggles, emphasises the need to consider the capitalist mode of production. This will be done by referring to relevant literature in the field of youth studies, together with elements from contemporary theory.

The Socialist Students and Mainstream Politics

The difficulties experienced by members of the Socialist Students when attempting to engage with the adult world of politics echoes the way young people are perceived by the adults who study them:

It appears that many sociologists take for granted that adolescents are non-political beings, and the naturalised assumption that adolescents are always 'developing' and are citizens-in-the-making but not yet capable of political decision-making largely goes unquestioned or unchallenged. (Gordon, 2007, p. 635)

It is as if adolescents are still practicing 'for the real thing' but are not yet recognised as political actors. It creates this space of 'delay', where adolescents can be trained and fitted properly into conventional politics (Fox, 2013). As noted above, this feature characterised the relationship that members of the Socialist Students tried to establish with the Labour Party. It also characterises the relationship that members of the Socialist Students have with the Student Union of one of the Manchester universities. They report its functioning as being modelled from the corporate world, as an organism for the implementation of the university's policies, privileging the university's interests over students'. In the words of Valentina, the Student Union is very apolitical, 'and consciously tries to maintain neutrality on political issues'. She complains about the Union not being interested in engaging students in their activities, of being very bureaucratic: 'there isn't actually any democratic structures for students to get involved to decide on policies' – 'I find the Union to be more of a hindrance than a help'. As mentioned by Gordon and Taft (2011), it is common for student councils and student units to follow 'a model of civic engagement designed by adults to "train" students for future participation while estranging them from real political power in the present' (p. 1512).

Andersson (2017) explored the difficulties in understanding what core elements are necessary to make youth–adult partnership successful and suggested that the nature of the relationship between adults and young people in formal settings gains from moving from a relation based on 'professionalism', where young people are isolated as a category to be taken care of by adults, to a relation based on commonality, where adults and young people are equal partners in a given community or situation (p. 1352). The point is to see adults not as enablers of the voice and influence of youth, but as potential partners in problem-solving and decision-making. This requires an approach not focused on young people's troubles but concerned with establishing a common goal and a shared outcome. As the multinational study carried out by Zeldin et al. (2017) concluded, 'youth are more likely to feel empowered and connected when they consider themselves to be partners with adults in community organisations' (p. 870).

The way that the Socialist Students seek alliances with different sectors of society emphasises this importance of establishing partnerships that are based on common struggles. For adults, this implies the realisation that to address young

people's problems is to address *our* common problems. And what are these common problems? From the PARTISPACE project we can name a few: unemployment, debt, homelessness, economic and social inequalities, alcoholism and drug addiction, loneliness, sexual and racial discrimination, ecological crisis, sustainable development, health, and a generalised lack of a meaningful purpose for life besides hedonism and generalised consumption. These are not 'youth' problems. These problems concern us all.⁷

The Nature of Political Engagement

When discussing youth participation, Farthing (2010) suggests that young people's turning away from politics should be fully appreciated, instead of condemned or embellished (p. 188). Using the work of Ulrich Beck, Farthing advocates for an alternative vision of young people as *radically unpolitical*. This moving away from traditional, state politics is justified because young people are 'navigating an entirely new form of society' (p. 188), turning to new forms of political participation based on self-actualisation or living your political ideology (p. 188). In the background lurks the idea that through participation in a specific lifestyle young people are addressing global economic and political issues. Moreover, 'kill-joy politics has no place in the lives of fun-loving young people' (p. 190), and Farthing suggests that 'politics needs to remake itself as fun' (p. 191). As explored by Thrift (2005, p. 3, in Kelly, 2018, p. 6), 'capitalism is also fun', and 'the routine, the mundane, the everyday is as important to the performativity of capitalism as the new, the inventive, the sexy' (Kelly, 2018, p. 7).

Such a depiction of youth participation contrasts with the one lived by the Socialist Students. There is an aura of seriousness and sobriety that characterises the activities of the group, illustrated above by the way they engage with theory and controversial social issues. Their meetings are not fun – though there were certainly funny moments – and there is no personalisation of politics.⁸ Instead, all members share a common idea, which in many cases determines their lifestyles. For them, the change they want to see in the world will not be achieved through a logic of self-improvement (your carbon footprint, your consumerism, etc.) but through collective engagement (see also Chapter 5 in the current volume).

Moreover, this is not a happy group, neither is happiness one of its goals. The crude realisation of the injustices of the world hinders them from being happy. However, this state of weariness, instead of leading towards apathy or melancholic nihilism, spurs them into action. In his *Hollywood Songbook*, political musician Hanns Eisler's brilliantly captures the essence of such ethos:

The only thing which consoles us for our miseries is diversion/and yet this is the greatest of our miseries/for it is this which principally hinders from reflecting upon ourselves/and which makes us insensibly ruin ourselves. Without this/we should be in a state of weariness, and this weariness would spur us/to seek a more solid means of escaping from it./But diversions amuse us and lead us unconsciously to death. (Žižek, 2016, footnote 36)

Capitalism is very good at creating diversions (McGowan, 2004). It offers us little perks to enjoy, keeping us distracted and sedated, hindering us from confronting the exploitation and oppression that encompasses it. In this sense, the search for happiness can be a very reactionary and pacifying category. As emphasised by Pahl (2012) in her philosophical exploration of *emotions*, for radical change to happen a minimal amount of *despair* is needed. Revolutionary engagement always occurs against the background of sadness or despair. Thus, the importance, as pointed out by Žižek (2016), is to keep alive the sense of tragedy that characterises current society. According to this philosopher, true courage is not to imagine an alternative – something that can be easily done by researchers, for instance, in the comfort of their homes – but to accept the consequences of the fact that,

[T]here is no clearly discernible alternative: the dream of an alternative is a sign of theoretical cowardice, it functions as a fetish which prevents us from thinking to the end the deadlock of our predicament. (p. 367)

The way some members of the Socialist Students refer to ‘socialism’ is not immune to this fetishisation. When confronted with a deadlock, it is common for them to refer to socialism as a panacea to solve the problems of current society. Perhaps the true challenge is to admit that there are no clearly discernible alternatives to capitalism today.

Identity Politics or Communism? Yes, Please!

As we saw, postmodern politics is characterised by a shift from metanarratives to local narratives and from general theories to pragmatic strategies. Change is not conceived as change in the totality – of a global mode of production, for instance – but as being focused on the emancipation and liberation from a plurality of social constraints and injustices associated with race, sexuality, ecology, language, cultural minorities, colonialism, religion, rurality and class – what has been known as identity politics. It is important to notice how postmodern politics has the great merit that it ‘repoliticises’ a series of domains previously considered ‘apolitical’ or ‘private’ (Butler et al., 2000, p. 98). One cannot highlight enough how much the women’s movement, the civil rights movement, the overall struggle against racism, and postcolonialism have been crucial in the transformation of the lives of people who have a common history of oppression. The postmodern claim that modern theories had generally discarded the historical discontinuities, local struggles, and forms of resistance, in favour of a ‘universal history’ – in short, the history of western white men – is completely justified. The fact remains, however, that identity politics do not in fact repoliticise capitalism, because the very notion and form of the ‘political’ within which it operates is grounded in the ‘depoliticisation’ of economy:

The problem is that The Leftist politics of the ‘chains of equivalences’ among the plurality of struggles is strictly correlative to the abandonment of the analysis of capitalism as a global economic system – that is, to the tacit acceptance of capitalist economics relations and liberal-democratic politics as the unquestioned framework of our social life. (Žižek, 1997, p. 162)

As Jameson (1991) explores, this resistance to globalising and totalising concepts like that of the mode of production – at a time where capitalism seems to affect all dimensions of life, and operating at full throttle under all political regimes, including communism – could very well be a function of the contemporary universalisation of capital. Late capitalism, to fully realise itself as a totality, must efface the theoretical instruments that allow us to address it as a totality: ‘the need to avoid evaluations of the system as a whole is now an integral part of its own internal organization as well as its various ideologies’ (p. 350).

Perhaps this theoretical and political disavowal, so convenient to the mechanisms of capital, explains why groups like the Socialist Students and the Socialist Party are often seen as something from the past, as conveyors of a message without a destiny. Nevertheless, what our research shows is that far from being dogmatic, the young people of these groups are engaging with all sectors of society that have a history of oppression and are forging alliances through discerning common struggles. For them, it is not a matter of neglecting the achievements produced by identity politics, nor indeed their current struggles, but supplementing them with a critique of capitalism that, in current postmodern politics, is clearly absent. In short, they are pleading for the return of the primacy of the economy, which by no means disregards all the important insights of research around identity politics, but rather creates the conditions for a more effective realisation of them.

Notes

1. Also called politics of recognition (Butler et al., 2000), or politics of difference (Seidman, 1994a). From an account of how the debate around identity politics is being currently shaped see Fukuyama (2018), Eagleton (2016) and Brown (2017).
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/feb/18/putins-quest-for-lost-glory>
3. What makes this episode truly remarkable is the fact that it involves a member of the old Soviet Communist Party, an entity which, during the twentieth century, came to epitomise the discourse of universality and totality in the field of politics.
4. All quotes from Adam originate from group discussions and individual interviews done with the Socialist Students group during the data collection stage of the Partispace project.
5. For an up to date discussion of this topic consider, for instance, the works of Nancy Frasier and Rahel Jaeggi (2018), and Kristen Ghodsee (2019).

6. Reclaim the Night is an annual campaign against rape and all forms of male violence against women (<http://www.reclaimthenight.co.uk/index.html>). In Manchester, the campaign is led by the Student Union of the University of Manchester (<https://manchesterstudentsunion.com/reclaimthenight>).
7. Nowhere is this appeal as strong as in the work of Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg. Although children and young people are the ones who will more directly suffer the consequences of our current *modus vivendi*, Thunberg's appeal does not rest in a division between young people and adults. Instead, youth climate change strikers are asking adults to step up alongside them: 'We're asking adults to step up alongside us ... today, so many of our parents are busy discussing whether our grades are good, or a new diet or the Game of Thrones finale – whilst the planet burns (...) But to change everything, we need everyone. It is time for all of us to unleash mass resistance' (<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/may/23/we-need-everyone-youth-activists-call-on-adults-to-join-climate-strikes>).
8. Despite my attempts during the interviews with Adam to bring back the conversation to his personal life, he naturally directed the conversation towards aspects of his activity as an engaged member of society, rather than discussing issues related with his own personality. Such a posture goes against the biographical ethos that seems to characterise some of the research on youth.

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