

## **Trying to Make a Difference. Political Involvement in Everyday Life**

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When the media writes about young people and political action, they usually focus on the big, spectacular demonstrations and protests. Those are the kind of political actions that are most visible to the public, and they thus get the most attention. In my study of political involvement among youth, based on interviews with young people in the Global Justice Movement, I show that many individuals see other, less visible ways of acting politically as just as important as the big manifestations. Seemingly trivial choices in everyday life; what you buy, what you eat, how you travel etc. are by them seen as political actions, in those cases when they are motivated by political opinions and values. To keep up a “politically aware” lifestyle is however not always easy.

In my paper I give examples of how the interviewed individuals reason around the connection between such inconspicuous actions, their political involvement and their long term goal to change the world.

## Trying to Make a Difference. Political Involvement in Everyday Life

The media image of young people's political involvement is to a large extent focused on large, spectacular manifestations and demonstrations. The occupation of the Youth House in Copenhagen in 2007, and the clashes with the police when they evicted the young occupants, is one recent example, which has been preceded by reports from the large scale demonstrations against the war on Iraq and mass demonstrations in connection with top meetings around the world, such as the EU summit meeting in Gothenburg in 2001. In the newspaper articles and news reports on TV, we thus encounter the most conspicuous forms of political actions. Those directed outwards, to the public, whose chief purpose it is to gain attention and possibly start a debate around certain political issues.

But there are also more inconspicuous forms of political action, which are privately performed, and where the aim is not primarily to gain attention, but to try to make a difference, even if that difference may appear as rather inconsequential, at least from an outside perspective or at a first glance. In this paper I am going to discuss the concepts of political involvement and political action, with a particular focus on such private, everyday actions, using examples from my research project on youth who are active in the Global Justice Movement in Sweden and Norway.<sup>1</sup>

### Background

My study is based on a fieldwork where I followed three groups (two Swedish and one Norwegian) for about a year each. Two of the groups belonged to the organization Attac and the third group was organizing a local so called Social Forum. The groups are thus examples of the local level of what is commonly called the Global Justice Movement, a transnational movement consisting of a number of organizations, networks and activist groups that among other things want to work for increased and spread democracy, and that are critical of neo-liberal economic theory and of some of the negative effects of globalization (Della Porta & Diani 2006, Klein 2002).

Attac was established in France in 1998, and has with time spread to Europe and Latin America in particular, but to some extent also to other parts of the world. The organization was established in Sweden and Norway in the spring of 2001. Attac has a platform with several goals: They want to introduce taxation on currency transactions, the so called Tobin tax. They argue for completely abolishing the national debts for the poorest countries in the world. They want to increase democracy and the influence of national governments and individuals, and diminish the influence of the market and multinational companies (Clinell 2000, Ergon & Abrahamsson 2001).

The Social Forum-movement stems from the World Social Forum, which originated in Porto Alegre, Brazil in 2001. The main idea was to promote democracy and create a meeting place for people engaged in different movements and groups, and to be a counterpart to the annual economic top meeting in Davos (Polet & Houtart 2001, Ponniah & Fisher 2003, Wennerhag 2006). Since then there have been arranged various regional, national and local Social Forums around the world, in addition to the annual World Social Forum. The group I followed arranged such a local Social Forum in a middle-sized Swedish town. At the Social Forum-weekend that was the result of almost a year of preparations, approximately 60 local groups and organizations came together for a weekend filled with seminars, workshops, lectures and cultural activities.

During the fieldwork I attended the regular meetings and some of the other activities arranged by the groups, in addition to interviewing around 20 of the younger members. This

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1 See Zackariasson 2006 for further details about this project.

is in other words a qualitative study, where individual experiences and narratives form the foundation for the analysis. The individuals I interviewed were between 19 and 27 years old. There are very few teenagers in these organizations, partly because they work with rather complicated issues that take some time and energy to get into, and partly because they are not youth organizations and thus not focused on attracting teenagers.

### Political Involvement – Interest, Convictions and Action

One of the key concepts within my study is political involvement. All of the young individuals that I interviewed could be said to be politically involved, and they generally regarded themselves as being that as well. Exactly what they included in the concept of political involvement, differed slightly from person to person, but there were a few requirements that stood out as necessary to fulfil, for a person to be regarded as politically involved. First of all he or she had to be genuinely interested in political and societal issues. These issues did not necessarily have to belong to the sphere of party politics, but could also concern aspects that are sometimes filed under headings such as “human rights issues” or “environmental issues”, instead of as “political issues”.<sup>2</sup>

To be seen as truly committed, the interest in politics was expected to be combined with ideologically or emotionally based convictions, or a kind of “inner fire”. Anita, one of the young women I interviewed, explained that she had for a long time not considered herself to be sufficiently committed, even though she was active in an environmental organization and very interested in politics, because she did not feel that she was adequately emotionally engaged in the issues she was working with. It was not until she, after several years of being active, read Naomi Klein’s influential book *No Logo* that she got really enthusiastic and finally felt emotionally engaged as well as intellectually (Klein 2002). At that point she also started to see herself as truly politically involved (Anita 2004.06.16).

The last requirement for an individual to be considered as truly politically involved, was that the political interest and ideological/emotional engagement were also applied in practice. All of the participants in my study were politically active, primarily in the Global Justice Movement through their involvement in Attac and the Social Forum. A majority of them were also active in other organizations. Some were members of political youth organizations or active in student politics, and many were active members in human rights or fair trade organizations such as Amnesty International, the Red Cross or the World Trade Shops – an organization that works with fair trade through importing goods directly from farmers in the third world and selling their products in their own shops in the Western world.

They generally had a rather wide view on what could be counted as political action. If there was a political motivation or purpose behind the action, they were likely to regard it as political. Amanda for instance helped organizing a film festival each year, and she defined this as a political action. She explained that one of the aims with the festival was to promote other films than the ones from the large film companies, and from other parts of the world than the Anglo-Saxon countries. This way of understanding her work with the festival, contributed to her defining it as political, even though such a political aspect was not part of the festival’s official image (Amanda 2002.04.11). Such a broad view of what was to be seen as political action, was prominent in several of the other interviews as well.

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2 What is seen as politics is from time to time rather narrowly defined, as in a large investigation of organisational practice in Sweden, from 2003 where the term “Political organizations” is reserved for political parties, youth parties and environmental organizations, while peace organizations and “Groups for international issues” such as Amnesty International, are categorized as “Solidarity organizations” (Vogel, Amnå et.al 2003). I use a much wider definition of politics, where social movements, action groups and political NGO:s are also seen as political organizations.

In this sense my data differed from the results presented in certain other studies that have been done on political activity among youth. One British investigation on political interest and engagement among 14-24 year olds, noted that a large percentage of the individuals asked had a rather narrow view on what could be seen as political action. They saw politics mainly as something that concerned grown-ups, and particularly politicians, and consequently as something that did not interest them or relate to them. At the same time they replied to other questions in the survey that they had participated in actions that the researchers would define as political – such as signing petitions, joining protests for local issues or writing letters to the editor in newspapers. Since the youths in the study did not see politics as something they were interested or active in, they themselves did however not label such actions political (White, Bruce et. al. 2000).

### Political Action – Spectacular Events

That the young individuals in my study had a broad understanding of the concept political action, made it easier for them to live up to the strong emphasis on the acting individual that is present in the official texts of Attac and the World Social Forum (found on their websites, in brochures, flyers etc.). One of the main ideas presented there is that all individuals have the potential of influencing the future of the world and that everyone ought to take the chance to do so (*Attac Norway; Attac Sweden; Fórum Social Mundial*). If the motto is that “Another world is possible” then the message is that we must all join in to make it happen.

How this is to be done in practice is however not completely clear, or rather, there are many ways of being active and trying to affect things. Not all political actions are, moreover, seen as something positive. In the Scandinavian countries this is especially true as soon as there is any sort of violence in the picture. The media reaction around the demonstrations in Gothenburg in 2001 is one of several examples of this. In the immediate media coverage of the events, the blame for the confrontations with the police was to a very large extent put on the protesters. Later investigations have criticized both the demonstrators and the police, but initially it was the demonstrators at large who were portrayed as the culprits. That a majority of them wanted to voice their opinions in a peaceful manner, was an aspect that got lost in the massive focus on the violence (Flyghed, Mathiesen, et al. 2001; Häggqvist 2002; Göteborgskommittén 2002; Lundälv & Liliequist 2002).

Not even all non-violent political activities are automatically seen as positive contributions to society. A British study has shown how the generally peaceful demonstrations against the war on Iraq, organised by many school pupils in Britain in 2003, were described in the media in terms of youngsters skipping school, and how the initiators were sanctioned in various ways (Cunningham & Lavalette 2004). Even though this was a case of traditional political, non violent actions, such as sit ins and demonstrations, they were in other words not primarily seen as legitimate political actions, but as some kind of youth revolt or protest against society.<sup>3</sup>

The participants in my study were generally sceptical to using violence as a method for achieving political goals. Their scepticism was founded partly in ethical or moral judgements, and partly in a view that it was counterproductive to use violent methods in the Scandinavian countries. They assumed that the issues they wanted to fight for, would not get any attention anyway, if they used violent methods, since the media and public debate would just be centred on the violence and not on the political issues as such.

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3 This may be seen as one example of how age can be significant for how political interest and engagement is understood and interpreted. Some of the participants in my study had experienced that others would connect their age to their political interest or opinions, like Jenny who had encountered the view that she would probably stop being a left wing radical once she got a bit older and wiser (Jenny 2002.09.27).

What kind of actions they regarded as the most effective ones for actually achieving results, varied from person to person, and in relation to what kind of goals they were aiming for. Some of them considered large manifestations, protest actions and demonstrations as the best way of influencing politicians and policy makers. My fieldwork was done at a time when there were many large demonstration marches against the war on Iraq, and a majority of the participants in the study had taken part in such events. Most of them had also participated in other demonstration marches, for example on the first of May, or in connection with more local issues. Demonstration marches were by many seen as something that made them feel as parts of something bigger, and as something which gave new impetus to their political involvement (cf. Blehr 2000, Engman 1999). But some remarked that they felt such events to be too much of a show, with not enough potential for actually affecting the political processes. Alva was one of those who talked about how she used to participate in demonstrations when she was younger. But by now, at the age of 26, she had lost faith in them, and had started to see them as mainly positive for the people participating, without any real power to influence political decisions. She instead saw actions such as writing polemic articles in the newspapers or starting email-campaigns to politicians as much more worthwhile and efficient political methods (Alva 2002.05.22).

### Small Actions with a Major Significance

But the significance of a particular action does not necessarily depend on what effects it may have. To *do* something can be an important part of political involvement whether or not the doing achieves direct visible results. Thus, even small, everyday actions can be meaningful to the individual and can be interpreted in political terms; a point demonstrated by several of those I interviewed. Twenty three year old Anita was a college student who also worked part-time in a small shop, and she talked about how her political convictions could influence her attitudes towards the customers:

Anita: I have ... a bit of an exaggerated attitude to waste /.../ It gets me down when I see people using a lot of plastic bags and things like that /.../ I feel like I should start commenting on it. I work in a shop and I don't feel like giving customers plastic bags. They have to ask for them, like (laughs). Absolutely. /.../ I feel that everything very much hangs together. It has to do with our greed culture. People grab what they ... Or rather, without any thought, use a lot of things they don't really need. They could have used a rucksack instead. It's not all about people having to lower their living standard, or eating less or not being allowed to watch telly, and all that. It's about a number of things that seem to have to do with common sense. (Anita 2004.06.15)

Anita's refusal to automatically offer plastic bags to her customers might be seen as not having any real effect on the total amount of consumption in the world. But for Anita it was a meaningful action she clearly related to her political convictions. Her refusal to hand out plastic bags unnecessarily, can thus, in all its simplicity, be seen as a political action, since she linked it to her view of distribution of resources and consumption. If such an action had been motivated by the store manager's order to save plastic bags, on the grounds of economic expediency, it would have had an altogether different meaning.

It became a significant political act for her, regardless of whether anyone else would interpret it in the same way, by the fact that Anita herself was conscious of on what grounds her action was based. Her reluctance to offer her customers plastic bags acquired, thereby, a symbolic meaning, at the same time as the customers themselves probably did not notice her act and were not conscious of her motivations for it. But a personal act of this kind can also be seen to have tangible consequences in the longer term, on the premise that if all the shop assistants in the world did the same as Anita, it would have a significant effect on

consumption. The refusal to hand out unnecessary plastic bags can then be likened to recycling, or being a vegetarian for ethical reasons. The solitary individual probably does not expect his or her recycling to have much effect on the refuse mountain but chooses to continue recycling anyway, in the hope that it can be beneficial should everybody else do the same. Anita's actions can thus be said to be both about doing what she feels is right for her, as an individual, and having the aspiration to be a good example, and about the conviction that if sufficient people did the same thing, the collective act would have a positive effect.

### Political Convictions in Everyday Life

For some of the individuals I interviewed, the political convictions influenced many areas of their daily lives. It could affect consumption, insofar as they tried to buy environmentally friendly products or fair-trade goods, but also travelling and transport, the use of media and even the relationships to friends and family. This was exemplified in the interview I made with Marie:

Marie: Another thing I thought of was this: Do your views influence your commitment, do they, like, influence your daily life? Do you act in a different way?

Marie: (hesitates) It's a difficult question, really, because you don't know how you'd act if you weren't the person you are.

Marie: Yes, that's right. Put it this way, then: Are there some situations in which you think about what you're doing as a result of your values, for instance, what things you buy, or ...

Marie: Yeah. Yeah, I buy organically labelled food and fair-trade and that kind of thing. Of course, I do that. ... And then I've become rather media conscious. So I try to make an effort to buy different newspapers. So that when I come to new places, I want to buy the local newspaper. And I'm happy to buy ... "Stockholms Fria"<sup>4</sup> or international newspapers if I see them. I think that makes a bit of a difference. ... Then I try not to fly unless I really have to. That has some effect too. ... And then I discuss a bit with my family, but not really that much. But you can influence your environment by simply discussing in it. Even if I don't always do that. It depends a little on the situation. /.../

Marie: Do you have a car?

Marie: No. But I'd like to get a car, if I had a bit more money, I think. But I think I'd make an effort not to use it routinely. ... just use it when I wanted to go on an outing or go somewhere special, or if I was going to buy something heavy.

Marie: You commute by train to Viksta? [where she had recently got a job] Or bus?

Marie: Mmm, train. But it's a mixture of economic and practical and environmental thinking.

(Marie 2003.01.19)

That Marie's everyday actions were influenced by her political opinions and convictions, comes across as something quite natural, almost self evident, for example in the way she only mentions in passing that she usually buys organically labelled food and fair-trade articles. It is clear from her reasoning that this was not something she carefully considered each time, but was a natural part of her pattern of consumption. The picture she presents of her day-to-

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4 *Stockholms Fria Tidning* – independent newspaper in Stockholm.

day life and its relationship to her political convictions can, in many ways, be seen as an example of political involvement almost becoming a lifestyle. In that sense her attitude to her political involvement resembles Anthony Giddens's concept *life politics*, where he argues that politics in the late modern era has come to be more about life style than of life choices (Giddens 1994 cf. Beck 1996, Breines 1982).

But political convictions integrating too closely with everyday life was not always thought of as being altogether positive. Just like Marie, Rikke described how her political involvement was interwoven with other parts of her life, but she was unsure as to whether political ideals should guide day-to-day life to too great an extent:

Rikke: /.../ I'm happy to give up things to help others have a better life, I think. Well, apart from the fact I've never especially had to do anything like that. But I think I probably would do it. /.../ That is, even though I grew up in a very posh neighbourhood and my parents had a lot of money, as I grew older I didn't need to have branded trousers and stuff like that... And yes, I did use my old bicycle for as long as it worked, and... And yes, I did buy second hand clothes at jumble sales and in Salvation Army shops, if I found something I liked.

Maria: Would you say your political commitment influenced your everyday life?

Rikke: Yes.

Maria: Especially when it comes to shopping and....

Rikke: Yes. And I mean... As a matter of fact, I discussed this a bit yesterday... /.../ A lot of people think that politics is just a hobby, or something you do in your free time, like playing football with the lads. But for me it's not like that. I think it's just as important that you should, up to a point, practice what you preach.

Maria: Mmm.

Rikke: /... / I mean, it's not possible, really, to separate /.../ the person and their political beliefs. And, of course, I'm cheating all the time, aren't I ... I shouldn't eat meat but I do. And you'll find me in Burger King from time to time, okay ... It's obviously completely impossible to live like that. Because all products are a problem in a way ... /.../ You can't go and become a complete eunuch in that area, can you? But /.../ it isn't as if I've suddenly become another person when I come back from a meeting. It's part of what I am, politically. And I hope that's the way it'll stay, that I won't make a u-turn at some point like, in a way, so many of the generation before me have done.

(Rikke 2004.03.31)

At the same time as Rikke emphasised the importance of practising what she preached she also realised it was difficult, and not completely desirable, to consistently allow political convictions to influence every day-to-day decision. Lina spoke in a similar vein when she described how she had moderated her behaviour over the years, from allowing a major part of her day-to-day life to be influenced by such aspects, to eventually developing a much freer attitude:

Maria: Is your everyday life influenced a lot by how you see, like, the distribution of resources and such stuff? Do you think of such things when you're shopping and that kind of thing?

Lina: That's kind of interesting, as a matter of fact, because I've done that really, really a lot. But now it's beginning to change, because I've come to realise, in a kind of way, that

the more I put in a load of energy to do ... work for Social Forum and work as a personal assistant and help X [an elderly disabled man amongst her circle of acquaintances], I don't have the energy! I was a vegan for a while. And I only used organic stuff ... it became too much, like: how do I live as an individual and does that influence things? But after a while it feels as though I'm putting too much energy into it. It can sometimes hinder you from choosing practically, that you can work on something with a bit longer perspective, in some way. Because ... for example, now I've started to eat, not meat, but fish and milk and eggs, simply because it's much easier when you eat out and when you're travelling and visiting people. So they don't need to feel awkward and criticised. So it's kind of interesting that I've changed, as a matter of fact. In that time. And it really feels, actually, as if ... it's not the end of the world, either. But that ... maybe it's like I start to believe it's more important with structural change than that I, as an individual, follow my convictions to the letter.

Maria: And before that you thought that if every individual ...

Lina: Yes, then I thought more that you ought to live as a good example, in a way. If everyone did, then it would be different.

(Lina 2003.02.22)

Lina, Marie and Rikke thus perceived their day-to-day actions as being an important way to achieve change. Lina, however, ultimately found that trying to live in an exemplary way required too much energy and left too little time to work on issues requiring a longer perspective. Furthermore, she was not happy that her lifestyle choices could be perceived as being critical of others, that her personal choices could make others feel awkward. That Lina eventually chose to abandon a way of behaviour that echoed the Kantian "duty" ethic – where all should live their life as though it could be elevated to general law – can also be understood in the light of the representational crisis which in many ways has taken place within Western society (Hastrup 1995:163ff; Beck 1996:214ff). When there is no longer a single truth it is far harder to maintain that my particular way of looking at things is the right way. The firm conviction of how humanity should live so that the future of the world will unfold in the best possible way can, in other words, come into conflict with a more post-modern influenced notion that what may be a good lifestyle for one, is not necessarily the same for others (cf. Weeks1995:140).

## Trying to Change the World

The small, inconspicuous day to day actions, that Lina, Marie and Rikke talk about in the interviews, and that also others participants in the study mentioned, would not necessarily be defined as *political* actions, in surveys of young people's political involvement. They are not tied to any political organization, and not to any clear-cut political ideology, but still they have a clear political value for those who perform them. This is one example of how a subject-oriented study of political involvement, where the individuals' definitions of politics are given space, may contribute to new understandings of politics and political action. Even though they may not appear as particularly significant actions from an outside perspective, they may be genuinely meaningful for the individual performing them.

This optimistic view on the meaningfulness of everyday actions, was quite consistent with a more general optimism concerning the ability to accomplish changes, which a majority of the participants in the study expressed. One of the reasons that have been put forward for why young people appear not to be particularly interested in politics and societal issues, which has been a recurrent theme in the public debate during the last few years, has been that they are disillusioned, and do not think that anything they can do would make any difference. This was

definitely not a view that was shared by the participants in this study. They all had the ambition to try to influence, not only their own future, but the future of the world, and they saw these personal, small actions as one way of contributing to this, alongside with other types of actions such as organisational work and large scale demonstrations etc.

Those small, inconspicuous actions were in other words directly linked to large structural issues such as free trade agreements, the distribution of goods on a global basis or increased democracy, at least in the eyes of the individuals themselves. This is an aspect of political involvement and political action that would be well worth further investigation.

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- Lina** 19 years old, Norway, Social forum. Interview 2003-02-22.
- Marie** 28 years old, Sweden, Attac & Social Forum. Interview 2003-01-19.
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