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Commentary

Youth Bulges, Civic Knowledge, and Political Upheaval

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Hart, Atkins, Markey, and Youniss (2004) reported an investigation of the “youth-bulge” phenomenon: the historical link between communities highly saturated with children and political upheaval. In Studies 1 and 2, they analyzed U.S. national survey data and found that neighborhoods with relatively high proportions of children to adults tend to contain (a) relatively high numbers of youth that have low levels of civic knowledge and (b) relatively high numbers of youth that volunteer for civic service. The authors asserted that these results demonstrate that the apparent heightened political activism of youth brought up in communities with large populations of children is a result of socialization processes that produce youth prone to both low levels of civic knowledge and high levels of civic participation. The authors argued that

the distrust of existing societal institutions and shallow political ideologies that are characteristic of individuals low in civic knowledge increase the likelihood that individuals can be recruited into revolutionary movements. (Hart et al., 2004, p. 591)

The data Hart et al. (2004) presented are interesting and the topic important. In particular, their finding that child saturation of neighborhoods positively predicts the proportion of children willing to volunteer for communal activities demonstrates how youth bulges can be important precursors to political revolutions. However, the theory presented by the authors, although well intentioned, may present a dangerously misleading vision of the type of people and the type of contexts that lead to political extremism, violence, and upheaval. Hart et al. suggested that revolutionary movements and political transformations are made up of youth relatively ignorant in terms of civil knowledge, with shallow ideologies that are, by implication, malleable to recruitment for nefarious purposes. Although not suggested by the authors, an implication is that simply educating such youth to give them civil knowledge might help prevent their recruitment. In reality, it is not the ignorant who rebel but the knowledgeable.

For their theory to be supported, the authors needed to show that youth bulges result in relatively high proportions of youth who are both low in civic knowledge and high in volunteerism; that is, the two variables should be negatively correlated. If this is the case, societies with youth bulges may indeed contain high proportions of easily manipulated “activist” youth. However, data presented in Hart et al. (2004) suggest that the opposite is true. For example, in Studies 1 and 2, education levels positively predicted both civic knowledge and volunteering. This implies that children actively involved in their communities in a volunteering capacity tend to be high rather than low in civic knowledge. Indeed, it appears that on an individual level, civic knowledge and volunteering are positively, if weakly, correlated (D. Hart, personal communication, September 6, 2004).

Is it the case that most people involved in political rebellions have relatively low civic knowledge? As found by Hart et al. (2004) and other investigators (cf. Kingston, Hubbard, & Lapp, 2003), education positively predicts civil knowledge. According to the theory of Hart et al., we would expect most people involved in political upheavals, and people who support such upheavals, to have relatively low education (and thus relatively low civic knowledge). In fact, a review of data investigating extreme political activity shows the reverse to be true. Education positively predicts a belief in personal and collective political efficacy that is essential to political engagement (Cohen & Dawson, 1993). Political protestors in Russia (Javeline, 2003), suicide bombers in the Middle East (Berrebi, 2003; Krueger & Maleckova, 2002), Egyptian Islamic militants (Ibrahim, 1980), and supporters of suicide terrorism in Palestine and Lebanon (Ginges, 2004) all tend to be relatively highly educated compared with their own populations. Moreover, in a classic study investigating the relationships among civic knowledge, trust in government, and riot participation, Paige (1971) found (a) a negative correlation between civic knowledge and trust in government among Black American men and (b) high levels of civic knowledge and low levels of trust in government among Black American men who participated in the 1967 Newark riots.

Although it is true that political rebels distrust the social institutions against which they are rebelling, this distrust tends to be deeply thought out, reflecting the psychological difficulty

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inherent in opposing extant systems and ideologies (cf. Jost & Banaji, 1994). For example, case studies of left-wing terrorist movements such as the Weathermen demonstrate that an important precursor to extreme political activity is the intellectual delegitimization of existent regimes and the construction of alternative civic models (Sprinzak, 1990). In general, even revolutionary movements purporting to specifically represent the poor and uneducated have tended to be dominated by the relatively well off and well educated, who are likely to possess a great deal of civic knowledge (Ginges, 1997).

As Hart et al. (2004) correctly observed, youth bulges can be important precursors of radical political transformations. However, the relationship between child saturation of communities and political upheaval is probably quite straightforward. For insurgent movements to survive, let alone prosper in the face of opposing legal authorities, they need to mobilize a sufficient number of supporters. Because such supporters are generally relatively young (Laqueur, 1999), and because community child saturation positively predicts the willingness of individual youth to volunteer for civic action (Hart et al., 2004), communities with youth bulges will provide revolutionary movements with a valuable opportunity for mass mobilization.

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